

Chéri

by

Colette

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# CHÉRI

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COLETTE



Translated by  
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New York  
ALBERT & CHARLES BONI

1929

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## CHAPTER I

“LÉA. Give me your pearls. Do you hear me, Léa? Give me your necklace.”

There was no response from the enormous bed of wrought-iron and copper which shone in the shadow like a coat of mail.

“Why don’t you give me your necklace? It looks as well on me as on you—and better.”

As the clasp snapped, the laces on the bed were roused and two naked arms, magnificent, with thin wrists, lifted two lovely lazy hands.

“Let it alone, Chéri, you’ve played enough with that necklace.”

“It amuses me. Are you afraid I’ll steal it?”

In front of the pink curtains barred by the sun he danced, black as a dainty devil on a grill. But as he drew near the bed he became white again in silk pyjamas above doe-skin mules.

“I’m not afraid,” said the soft alto voice from the bed. “But you’ll wear out the thread. Those pearls are heavy.”

"They are that," said Chéri with respect. "He certainly didn't do things by halves, whoever settled these on you." He stood before a mirror framed against the wall between two windows and considered his reflection—that of a very handsome and a very young man, neither big nor little, and with hair like the plumage of a blackbird. He opened his pyjamas on a chest that was lusterless, hard and curved like a shield: and the same pink high-light played on his teeth, on the whites of his black eyes and on the pearls of the necklace.

"Take off that necklace," insisted the woman's voice. "Do you hear me?"

Motionless before his reflection, the young man laughed to himself. "Yes, yes, I hear you. I know well enough that you're afraid I'll make off with it."

"No. But if I offered to give it to you, you'd probably take it."

He ran toward the bed and bounced into it like a ball. "Wouldn't I, though. I'm not old-fashioned. I think it's idiotic for a man to let a woman give him one pearl for his pin or two for his studs and then think he should be horrified if she offers him fifty. . . ."

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"Forty-nine."

"Forty-nine then. I know how many there are. And tell me they don't look well on me. Say I'm not good-looking enough for them. Say it!" He tossed toward the recumbent woman a provoking laugh which showed his small teeth and the soft inner sill of his lips.

Léa sat up in bed. "No, I won't say it. In the first place you'd never believe it. But can't you laugh without wrinkling your nose like that? How will you like it when you've made three ugly lines between your eyes?"

Immediately he stopped laughing, relaxed the skin on his forehead and held in the fullness of his chin with the instinctive gesture of a faded old flirt. They looked at each other hostilely, she leaning on her elbow among her sheets and lace, he sitting side-saddle on the edge of her bed. He thought: My wrinkles, eh? Wrinkles are the last things she ought to mention. She thought: Why is he ugly when he laughs—he, the handsomest boy I ever saw? She reflected a moment, then made her thoughts audible.

"You know, you look horrid when you're happy.

You only laugh for malice or mockery. It makes you ugly. You're often ugly."

"That's not true," cried Chéri, irritated.

Anger knotted his eyebrows over the rise of his nose, magnified his eyes, bright with insolence and bristling with lashes, and widened the intolerant and inexperienced curve of his mouth. Léa smiled to see him as she loved him most—mutinous but amenable, insufficiently chained and yet incapable of being free. She put her hand on the young head which shook at the yoke impatiently. She murmured as one calms an animal:

"Now, now . . . What's this? What's this, now . . ."

He threw himself against her big beautiful shoulder, pushing with his forehead, his nose, hollowing out his familiar place, already closing his eyes and seeking the accustomed sheltered drowsiness of long forenoons, but Léa thrust him away:

"None of that, Chéri. You're lunching with the national harpy and it's already twenty to twelve."

"Really? Am I lunching at the old girl's to-day? And you too?"

Lazily Léa slid deeper into her bed. "Not I. I'm off duty. I'll go drink coffee at two-thirty—







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or tea at six—or have a cigarette at quarter to eight. Don't worry, she'll see enough of me. And anyhow I wasn't invited."

Chéri who was standing and sulking grew radiant with malice: "I know, I know why! We're going to have high society. We're going to have her nibs, Marie-Laure, and that poisonous brat of hers."

The large blue eyes of Léa, wandering, fixed themselves: "Oh, yes. She's charming, the little girl. Less so than her mother, but still charming . . . For the last time, Chéri, take off my necklace."

"No luck," sighed Chéri, unclasping it. "It would look well in the hope-chest."

Léa lifted herself on one elbow. "What hope-chest?"

"Mine," said Chéri with facetitious importance. "*My* hope-chest of *my* jewels for *my* marriage." He jumped in the air, cut a dance step in space, came to earth again, butted open the curtains and disappeared, crying: "My bath, Rose. And be quick about it. I'm lunching with the old girl."

"Of course, of course," mused Léa. "A lake in the middle of the bathroom floor, eight towels

floating at high tide and the scrapings from his razor in the wash basin. If only I had two bathrooms. . . ." But she realized as usual that in order to obtain this it would be necessary to tear out a clothes closet and lop off a corner of her dressing room. So she concluded as usual:

"I'll simply have to be patient until Chéri marries."

She lay down again on her back and noted that Chéri the night before had left his socks on the mantel-piece, his brief underdrawers on the chiffonier, his cravat around the throat of a bust of Léa. She smiled in spite of herself at this hot masculine disorder and half closed her great tranquil eyes of a youthful blue and edged with unfaded chestnut lashes. At the age of forty-nine, Léonie Vallon, called Léa de Lonval, was rounding out the happy career of a courtesan who has become rich, of a good creature whom life has spared from flattering catastrophes or exalted sufferings. She made a secret of the date of her birth but willingly admitted, letting fall on Chéri a glance of voluptuous condescension, that she had reached the age to allow herself certain sweet comforts. She liked order, beautiful linen, ripe

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wines and well-thought-out food. Her youth as a courted blond, then her maturity as a rich demi-mondaine, had been carried off without a scandal or subterfuge on her part and her friends could remember a Drag-day about 1895 when Léa said to the secretary of Gil-Blas who was treating her as if she were a great artist: "An artist, am I? Oh really, my lovers are too kind."

Her contemporaries were jealous of her imperturbable good health and the young women of the fact that the mode of 1912, already fulled over the back and front, merely made a successful rallying point around her fine bust. Both old and young equally envied her possession of Chéri.

"Though, good God," said Léa, "there's no reason why they should. They're welcome to him. I don't tie him up, he goes out alone."

In this she lied by half, proud as she was of a liaison—occasionally she called it an "adoption" owing to her weakness for truth—which had lasted for six years.

"The hope-chest," repeated Léa. "Allow Chéri to marry? It's not possible, it's not—human. Give a young girl to Chéri—why not give a doe to dogs? People don't know what Chéri is."

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She rolled between her fingers as if it were a rosary the pearl necklace which had been tossed on the bed. She removed it at night now because Chéri, who had a passion for fine pearls and who fondled it in the mornings, would have noted that Léa's throat, in thickening, was losing its whiteness and showing flagging muscles beneath the skin. Now she snapped the jewels around her neck without lifting herself and took a mirror from her night table.

"I look like a gardener's wife," she said with untrammelled judgment. "Like a market-gardener's wife. A Norman market-gardener's wife about to go out into the potato field with a pearl collar on. It's as becoming to me as an ostrich feather stuck up my nose—and I'm polite to let it go at that."

She shrugged her shoulders, severe with all she no longer loved in herself—a hearty complexion, healthy, a little ruddy—the complexion of out-of-doors, well suited to enrich the frank color of her blue eyes. Her proud nose was still pleasing to Léa. "The nose of Marie-Antoinette," Chéri's mother always stated, never forgetting to add: "And in two more years our dear Léa will have

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the chin of Louis Sixteenth." In harmony with the large eyes which winked slowly and rarely, the mouth opened infrequently to laugh over tight teeth, contenting herself with smiling in a gesture which had been praised a hundred times, sung about, photographed—a profound and confident smile which never tired.

As for her body: "Everyone knows," Léa had said, "that a good body lasts a long time." She could still show it, that great white body tinted with pink, gifted with long limbs and the flat back which one sees on the nymphs of Italian fountains: the dimpled hips, the high breasts "which would hold up," as Léa said, "until well after Chéri's marriage."

She rose, wrapped herself in a dressing-robe and opened her curtains. The noonday sun entered the pink room, bright and over-decorated with a luxuriance that was out-of-date—double lace curtains at the windows, rose-bud pink silk on the walls, gilded wood, electric lights swathed in pink and white, and antique furniture upholstered in modern brocade. Léa refused to give up either this stuffy room or its bed which was something of an indestructible masterpiece of mixed wrought

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iron and copper, hard on the eye and on the bones. "Oh, come now, come now," Chéri's mother always protested. "It's not so bad as all that. Personally I like this room. It belongs to a period and so it must have style."

Léa smiled at this recollection of the national harpy while twisting up the loose strands of hair. She hurriedly powdered her face on hearing two doors bang and the shock of a booted foot against some fragile piece of furniture. Chéri re-entered in trousers and shirt, without his collar, his ears white with talcum powder, and ill-tempered.

"Where's my scarf-pin? This is a hell of a house. Have they taken to pinching the jewels around here I'd like to know?"

"Marcel's wearing your pearl to do the marketing in," said Léa gravely.

Chéri, devoid of humor, came up against her pleasantry like an ant against a piece of coal. He stopped his angry walking and could find nothing to say but: "Oh. Then,—look here, I'm in a hurry and want my pin and my boots."

"What for? You can't stick your pin in your waistcoat and you already have one pair of shoes on."



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Chéri tapped with his foot. "I've had enough of this. Nobody looks after me here and I'm tired of it."

Léa put down her comb. "Then why not leave?"

He shrugged his shoulders rudely. "That's easy enough to say."

"And mean. Go. I hate guests who complain about the service and leave their odds and ends all over the place. Go back to your sainted mother, my son, and stay there."

He failed to hold up under Léa's gaze, dropped his eyes and protested like a school-boy. "My word, can't I ever say anything at all? At least you're going to lend me your motor to go to Neuilly?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because I'm going out at two and Philibert is eating his lunch."

"Where are you going at two o'clock?"

"To say my prayers. But if you need three francs for a taxi . . . Idiot," she said tenderly, "at two o'clock I'm probably going to take coffee at your mother's. Does that satisfy you?"

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He shook his head like a young ram. "Everybody abuses me around here, nobody does what I want. They hide my things on me, they . . ."

"Won't you ever learn to dress yourself?" She took from Chéri's hands his collar which she buttoned, his cravat which she knotted. "There. And that awful purple tie! It's just the thing for her highness Marie-Laure and family. And you want to put a pearl pin on top of all that? You little dago! Why not some earrings as well?"

He made no resistance; blissful, soft, vacillating, absorbed by a lassitude and pleasure which closed his eyes. "Nouonune, darling," he murmured, calling her by the name he had given her when he was a child.

She brushed his ears, straightened the blueish parting which divided his black hair, touched his temple with a finger wet with perfume and kissed him quickly because she was unable to resist the invitation of his mouth breathing close to her. Chéri opened his eyes, his lips, stretched his hands.

She evaded. "No. It's quarter to one. Run. And don't let me see you again."

"Ever?"

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"Never." She laughed with uncontrollable tenderness.

Alone, she smiled with pride, heaved an uneven sigh of defeated desire and listened to Chéri's footsteps in the court of her private hotel. She saw him open and close the gate, start off with his wingéd walk only to be met by the appreciation of three shop girls, marching arm in arm by the curb.

"Oh, mama. He's too good to be true. Wonder would he let us touch him for luck?"

But Chéri, blasé, did not even turn.

## CHAPTER II

“MY bath, Rose. Tell the manicurist she may go—it’s too late. My blue tailor-made, the new one. The blue hat, the one faced with white, and my little shoes with the straps. . . . No, wait.” Léa, her legs crossed, rubbed her bare ankle and shook her head. “No, my high laced shoes of blue kid. My legs are a little swollen today. It’s the heat.”

Her maid, aged and with a lace cap, lifted toward Léa a comprehensive glance. “Yes, it must be the heat,” she repeated docilely, shrugging her shoulders as if to say, “We know better. Nothing lasts forever.”

Chéri out of sight, Léa became lively, precise, relieved. In less than an hour she had been bathed, rubbed with alcohol, scented with sandalwood; her hair had been dressed, her shoes had been laced. While the curling iron heated she had found time to run through her butler’s account book, call the under footman, Emile, to show him

where he had failed to polish the pier glass. Her competent eye, rarely deceived, darted everywhere and she lunched in contented solitude, smiling at the dry Vouvray wine and at the June strawberries served with their stems in a plate of Rubelles china, green as a wet tree-toad. A good trencher-man of an earlier date must have chosen for this rectangular dining-room its huge Louis Sixteenth mirrors and the English furnishings of the same period—lofty buffets, long-legged sideboards, slim solid chairs of dark wood, almost black, carved with slender wreaths. The mirrors and massive service of silver received the abundant light of the day, the green reflection from the trees in the Avenue Bugeaud, and Léa also observed, eating all the while, the red powder clinging between the tines of a fork and half closed an eye, better to judge the polish of the dark wood-work. The butler behind her regarded her investigation with foreboding.

“Marcel,” said Léa, “the wax on your floors has been sticky for the last week.”

“Sorry, madame, if madame thinks so.”

“Well, she does. Add some gasoline and let it melt in a double boiler. It’s no work at all. You

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brought up the Vouvray a little too soon. Pull the curtains as soon as you've cleared the table, the heat is at its worst now."

"Very good, madame. Will Monsieur Ch . . . —Monsieur Peloux dine in tonight?"

"Probably. No *crème-surprise* this evening. Tell them to make us an ice from the juice of the strawberries. And now serve the coffee in the boudoir."

In rising, straight and tall, her legs visible under the skirt that veneered her thighs, she had time to read in the butler's discreet glance, "Madame certainly is a handsome woman," which did not displease her.

Handsome, thought Léa as she mounted the stairs to her boudoir. No more. Now I have to have something white around my face, pink underclothes and tea-gowns. Handsome. Pah! I don't have to be any more.

Still she did not permit herself a siesta in her boudoir of painted silk after she had finished with her coffee and newspapers. And it was with a face set as if going into battle that she said to her chauffeur: "To Madame Peloux's."







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The alleyways of the Bois, dry beneath their new June foliage which the wind had faded, the toll-gate, Neuilly, the Boulevard d'Inkermann. . . . "How many times have I taken this drive?" Léa asked herself. She counted, then tired of counting and, softening her steps on Madame Peloux's gravel path, reconnoitered to locate the sounds which came from the house.

"They're in the hall," she said.

She had powdered her face again before arriving and wrapped about her chin her blue veil which made a screen as fine as fog. And she responded to the footman who asked her to enter and pass through the house: "No, I'd rather go round by the garden."

A true garden, almost a park, isolated the whiteness of the vast villa set up in Parisian suburbs. Madame Peloux's villa had been called a country residence during the period when Neuilly was still on the outskirts of Paris. The stables, changed into garages, the dog-runs and kennels and the wash-house were still witnesses, as well as the spaciousness of the billiard-hall, the vestibule and the dining-room.

"Madame Peloux certainly got her money's

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worth," devotedly repeated the old parasites who, in exchange for a dinner and a glass of brandy, assembled to take a hand at besique or poker. And they added: "But whoever knew Madame Peloux to make a bad bargain?"

Marching in the shade of the acacias between the blazing knolls of rhododendrons and the rose-trellis, Lea heard a murmur of voices, pierced by the nasal trumpetings of Madame Peloux and the arid laughter of Chéri.

"As usual, he's laughing out of the wrong side of his mouth, that young man," she mused. She halted a moment to listen more carefully to a new feminine note, weak and amiable and quickly drowned out by the powerful trumpet-tones. That'll be the young girl, Léa thought. She hurried her pace and found herself on the threshold of a glass hall where Madame Peloux rushed forward, crying: "And here's our handsome friend."

The jug-shaped Madame Peloux who was really Mademoiselle Peloux, had been a dancer from her tenth to her sixteenth years. At times Léa hunted in Madame Peloux for something which might recall the chubby little blond Eros of long ago or, later, the dimpled nymph, but could find nothing

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except the enormous implacable eyes, the fine hard nose and a flirtatious fashion of still pointing out her toes in what was called the "fifth position" in the ballet.

Chéri, pulling himself out from the depths of a rocking chair, kissed Léa's hand with involuntary grace and ruined his gesture by: "For heaven's sake, why have you worn a veil again? I loathe them."

"Will you let her be?" interrupted Madame Peloux. "Don't you know it's not polite to ask a lady why she wears a veil? We'll never be able to do anything with him," she said tenderly to Léa.

Two women had risen in the blond shadow of the straw blind. One in mauve rather coldly offered her hand to Léa who looked her over from head to foot. "Good God, you're lovely, Marie-Laure. You're simply perfection."

Marie-Laure deigned to smile. She was a young woman with red hair and brown eyes who was able to astonish without making a move or speaking a word. She pointed out, as if by coquetry, the other young woman. "But you know my daughter, Edmée," she said.

Léa lifted her hand which the young girl ac-

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cepted reluctantly. "I should have known who you were; my child, except that school misses change so quickly and that Marie-Laure never changes at all except to grow more ravishing. You're through with boarding school now?"

"Well, I should hope so, I should hope so indeed," cried Madame Peloux. "You can't keep such a marvel of grace and charm under a bushel basket forever, especially when it's only seen nineteen summers."

"Eighteen," said Marie-Laure suavely.

"Eighteen, eighteen. Of course it's only eighteen. Léa, don't you remember? This child was only making her first communion the year that Chéri ran away from school, you know as well as I do. Yes, you did, you little good-for-nothing, you ran away from school and Léa and I were both half out of our minds, poor old things."

"I remember perfectly," said Léa and she exchanged with Marie-Laure a little nod of the head—such as a good fencer makes when his opponent scores a point.

"You ought to marry her off, you ought to marry her off," continued Madame Peloux who never repeated a first-rate truth less than twice.

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"And we'll all dance at the wedding." She whipped the air with her little arms and the young girl regarded her with adolescent astonishment.

She's a perfect daughter for Marie-Laure, thought Léa watchfully. She has everything within limits which the mother has too much of. Soft ashy hair like powder, troubled secretive eyes, a mouth which evades both speech and smiles. She has everything that Marie-Laure needs but her mother must hate her just the same. . . .

Madame Peloux wedged in a maternal smile between Léa and the young girl. "You should have seen how well those two young people have been hitting it off in the garden." She indicated Chéri who stood smoking in front of the glass partition. He was balancing his cigarette-holder in his teeth and tilting his head to avoid his own smoke. The three women watched the young man who, his forehead at an angle, his lashes half closed, his feet motionless and joined, still seemed to be wingéd somehow, planing and drowsing in the air. Léa did not miss the frightened conquered expression in the young girl's eyes. She therefore gave herself the pleasure of making her

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quiver by touching her arm. Edmée trembled the length of her body, drew back her arm and said savagely, inaudibly: "What?"

"Nothing," said Léa. "My glove dropped."

"Shall we go, Edmée?" Marie-Laure commanded carelessly.

The young girl, speechless and docile, walked toward Madame Peloux who flapped her fins. "Already? Oh, no. But we'll see each other again, we'll see each other again."

"It's late," said Marie-Laure. "And then you're expecting a lot of people, it being Sunday afternoon. And this child isn't accustomed to . . ."

"Of course, of course," Madame Peloux cried tenderly. "You've kept her shut up so long, she's had to live so much alone."

Marie-Laure smiled and Léa looked at her as much as to say: "This time it's one on you."

"But we'll see each other soon."

"Thursday, Thursday! Léa, you'll come to dine Thursday, too, won't you?"

"I'll come," responded Léa.

Chéri had rejoined Edmée at the threshold of the hall where he contented himself by standing near her and disdaining speech. He heard Léa's

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promise and turned: "Good. We'll all take a drive together."

"Yes, yes, just what you young things need," insisted Madame Peloux, touched. "Edmée will sit in front with Chéri and we'll squeeze in the back, the rest of us. Make way for youth! Make way for youth! Chéri, darling, will you ask them to bring around Marie-Laure's car?" Although her tiny round feet slipped and slid upon the gravel she took her guests to the end of the path and then left them to Chéri. When she returned Léa had removed her hat and lighted a cigarette.

"If they aren't too sweet, the pair of them," gasped Madame Peloux. "Don't you think, Léa?"

"Lovely." Léa breathed in a puff of smoke. "But that Marie-Laure . . ."

Chéri came in. "What's Marie-Laure done?" he demanded.

"Nothing—except be beautiful."

"Ah, ah." Madame Peloux approved of this. "It's true, it's true. She really has been awfully pretty."

Chéri and Léa looked at each other and laughed.

"Has been?" Léa underlined. "But she's the picture of youth. She hasn't a wrinkle. And she



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can wear even pale lilac, that foul color which I hate and which hates me."

The large implacable eyes and the thin nose deserted their glass of brandy. "The picture of youth? The picture of youth?" Madame Peloux squealed. "Pardon me. Pardon me. Marie-Laure had Edmée in 1895—no '94. She had just run off with a singing teacher and turned down Khalil-Bey who had given her that famous pink diamond which— No, no. Wait . . . That was a year earlier. . . ." She was trumpeting at the top of her voice and off key.

Léa put a hand over her ear and Chéri declared sententiously: "It would be too much to expect a whole afternoon without having to put up with mother's voice."

She regarded her son without anger, being accustomed to his insolence and sat down with dignity. Her feet failed to touch the floor, the wicker chair being too high for her short legs. She warmed her glass of brandy in her hand. Léa, balanced in a rocking chair, occasionally glanced at Chéri—Chéri sprawled on a cane couch, his waistcoat unbuttoned, a cigarette dying between his lips, a curl hanging over his eye, and thought

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to herself: what a good-looking young swine he was.

All of them sat side by side without making any effort to please each other or to speak, at rest and in a certain fashion happy. Being used to each other permitted them to be silent, brought Chéri back to his native fecklessness and Léa to her accustomed calm. Because of the increasing heat Madame Peloux lifted her narrow skirt over her knees, displaying her small sailor-like legs, and Chéri angrily pulled off his cravat, a gesture Léa disapproved by clucking at him: "—Tch, tch."

"Oh, let him alone," Madame Peloux protested as if at the bottom of a dream. "It's so hot. Do you want a kimono, Léa?"

"No, thanks. I'm very comfortable."

The abandoned lack of dignity of these afternoons sickened her. Never had her young lover surprised her by day half-dressed or in house slippers. "Naked if need be," she always said to herself. "But never when I'm neither one thing or the other." She picked up her illustrated paper and did not read it. —Like mother, like son, she thought. Put either one of the Peloux at a smart dinner table or in the middle of a field and—crack!

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the mother unhooks her corset and the son unbuttons his vest. They both have the souls of barmaids off duty. She raised her eyes vindictively to one of the barmaids and saw that he slept, his lashes folded down over his white cheeks, his mouth closed. The well-molded arch of his upper lip, illuminated from beneath, caught in its corners two gleams of metallic light and Léa had to admit that he looked more like a god than a beer-drawer. Without rising, she skillfully plucked a lighted cigarette from between Chéri's fingers and tossed it into the ashtray. The sleeper's hand relaxed and like drooping leaves, let fall his pointed fingers tipped with malevolent nails—a hand not exactly feminine but prettier than was necessary—a hand which Léa had kissed a hundred times and not with servility but for the pleasure involved—the perfume.

Over her newspaper she eyed Madame Peloux. —Is she asleep too? Léa liked the siesta of the mother and son to afford her, wide-awake, an hour of complete moral solitude amidst heat, shadow and sun.

But Madame Peloux was not sleeping. She held herself like a Buddha in her wicker-chair, looking

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straight ahead of her and sucking at her brandy with the eagerness of an alcoholic baby.

"Why isn't she asleep?" Léa asked herself. "It's Sunday. She lunched well. All her old hooligan friends will arrive at five o'clock. So she ought to sleep now. If she's not asleep it's because she's up to something."

They had known each other for twenty-five years. Theirs was the unfriendly intimacy of kept women that one man enriches, then abandons and still another ruins—the peevish affection of rivals stalking each other's first wrinkle or white hair. Theirs was the comradeship of women with highly defined characters, both shrewd at gathering in the cash, but one was a miser and the other a sybarite. . . . All these old ties between them counted. Another tie had brought them even closer together—Chéri.

Léa could remember Chéri as a baby, a prodigy of long curls. In his infancy he was not yet called Chéri but Fred.

Chéri, by turns adored or forgotten, matured among blotchy maids and tall sardonic valets. Though his birth had coincided with a mysterious

rise in the family fortune, no smart English nurse or fraülein was furnished him by his mother who called them all "money-sucking vampires."

"Charlotte Peloux, woman left over from another generation," the old tarnished dying and indestructible Baron de Berthelemy used to say. "Charlotte Peloux, I make my respects to you as the only light woman who ever dared bring up her son as the son of a tart. Woman of another generation, you don't read, you never travel, you're interested only in your neighbors and you leave your son to the tender mercies of bad servants. How perfect! What nineteenth century literary realism! It's as good as any of the worst masterpieces of the period. And to think you never even heard of them."

Chéri enjoyed all the pleasures of a shameless childhood. While he still lisped he picked up the low quips of the butler's pantry. He shared the clandestine supper parties held in the kitchen. He had baths of orris-root in his mother's tub or hasty scrubblings from the corner of a towel. He alternately endured indigestion from too much candy and cramps of hunger when everyone forgot his dinner. He bored himself, half-naked and catch-

ing cold, at the flower fêtes where Charlotte Peloux showed him off among roses wet with dew. But he managed to amuse himself royally at the age of twelve in an illicit gambling house where an American woman gave him a fistful of gold pieces to bet and told him he was certainly a little masterpiece. About the same time Madame Peloux gave her son a tutor, an abbé who at the end of ten months she dismissed: "Because," she confessed, "that black robe which I saw dragging all about the house made me feel I'd taken in a poor relation—and God knows there's nothing sadder than having a poor relation about the place."

At fourteen Chéri tried boarding school. But he didn't believe in it. He loathed restraint and ran away. Not only did Madame Peloux find the energy to incarcerate him once more but before the tears and insults of her son, she added, hiding her eyes: "Oh, I won't see you cry like that. I won't see you cry." So sincere was this inability that as a matter of fact she left town in company with a man who was young if not scrupulous, only to return two years later alone. This was her last emotional sally.

She found Chéri thin from having grown too

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fast, his eyes sunk in black circles, wearing horsey clothes and talking worse than ever. She beat her breast and jerked Chéri out of boarding school. He refused to work, wanted horses, carriages, jewels, demanded enormous monthly allowances and at the moment when his mother was beating her breast and crying like a pea-hen at the same time, he stopped her with these words:

“Ma’mé Peloux, don’t get excited. Have no fear that I’ll bring you down to sleeping on straw. For all of me you’ll die in your own downy bed and with your boots on. . . . I hate lawyers. Let’s just say that your purse is mine and don’t worry about me or it. . . . Men friends cost nothing—a dinner and a bottle of champagne. As for the pretty ladies, Ma’mé Peloux, considering that I’m your child trust me to express my gratitude by giving them no more than a mere trinket—and maybe I won’t have to do the giving at all.”

He pirouetted while she shed soft tears and proclaimed herself the happiest of mothers. But when Chéri began buying automobiles she began trembling about expenses again until he recommended instead to “just keep an eye on the gasoline bills, if you please, Ma’mé Peloux,” and thrift-

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ily sold the horses. Nor was he above checking up on the expense of the two chauffeurs. His calculations were quick and accurate, his rapid round digits tossed on paper contrasting markedly with his large laborious handwriting.

He passed his seventeenth year in turning into a miniature old man, a fussy little property owner with his nose in everything, still handsome but thin and short-winded. More than once Madame Peloux met him on the basement staircase where he had been counting over the bottles in the wine cellar.

"Can you believe it," said Madame Peloux to Léa. "It's too wonderful."

"Much too wonderful," replied Léa. "He must be ill. Chéri, stick out your tongue."

He protruded it with disrespectful grimaces and other irreverent manifestations which failed to shock Léa, a familiar friend, a sort of doting foster-mother whom he called by her first name.

"Is it true," inquired Léa, "that you were seen last night at a bar with old Lili, sitting on her knees?"

"Her knees," scoffed Chéri. "She hasn't had any for years. They disappeared long ago."



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"Is it true," insisted Léa more severely, "that she made you drink gin with pepper in it? Don't you know that that'll ruin your stomach?"

One day Chéri, wounded, responded to Léa's interrogation: "I don't know why you ask me questions—you ought to know what I was doing since you were there in the little loge in the back with Patron, the prize fighter."

"That's perfectly true," said Léa impassively. "But Patron is somebody. He's no dissipated little whipper-snapper like some people I know. He has something else in his favor beside tuppenny cheek and black circles under his eyes."

That week Chéri capped the climax by staying up all night in Montmartre and at the Markets with women who called him "the kid" and "passion flower," but he found no pleasure. His head ached and he coughed constantly. And Madame Peloux who confided to her masseuse, to Madame Ribot, to her corset-maker, to old Lili, to Berthelémy-le-Desséché, her heart-breaking announcement: "Ah, for us mothers life is a perfect calvary," passed without a pain from the state of happiest-of-mothers to that of mother-martyr.

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A night in June which assembled Madame Peloux, Léa and Chéri in the conservatory at Neuilly changed the destinies of the young man and the already matured woman. The chance that for the evening had scattered Chéri's so-called friends—a little wholesale wine merchant known as the young Bolster, and the Vicomte Desmond, a parasite barely of age, difficult and haughty—brought Chéri back to the maternal roof where habit had also drawn Léa.

Twenty years, a past made up of similar wan evenings, a lack of friends, also that defiance and weakness which toward the end of their lives isolate women who have loved only love, settled them face to face for one more night to be endured while waiting for another identical evening,—these two women, each suspect in the other's eyes. Both stared at the taciturn Chéri. Madame Peloux, without the force of authority to take her son in hand, limited herself to hating Léa a little each time a gesture bent her white throat, her healthy cheek toward the pale cheek and transparent ears of the boy. She would willingly have bled the robust neck of the woman where the wrinkles shaped like the girdle of Venus

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had begun to weigh on the flesh, in order to dye red the greenish-white lily her son resembled. Yet it did not occur to her to transplant her frail flower to the country.

"Chéri, why do you drink brandy?" Léa scolded.

"In order to keep company with Ma'me Peloux who otherwise would have to drink alone," Chéri answered.

"What are you doing tomorrow?"

"Don't know. And you?"

"I'm going to Normandy."

"With—?"

"That's none of your affair."

"With our good friend Spéleïeff?"

"You're behind the times. That was over two months ago. Spéleïeff is in Russia."

"Chéri, my dear, you'd forget your head if it weren't fastened on. Don't you remember the charming desertion dinner Léa invited us to last month after he left her? Léa, you haven't given me the recipe for those lobsters I liked so much."

Chéri sat up, his eyes brightening greedily. "Oh, yes, lobsters swimming in cream sauce. Oh, I'd love to have some."

"You see," Madame Peloux said reproachfully,

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"he has no appetite at all and yet he would have loved some lobsters with . . ."

"Oh, shut up," Chéri ordered. "Léa, are you seeking the shady countryside in company with Patron?"

"I am not, my dear. Patron and I are merely friends. I'm going alone."

"Oh, rich enough to go alone, eh?" Chéri tossed off.

"I'll take you along, if you like. There'll be nothing to do but eat, drink and sleep . . ."

"What deserted village are you going to?" He arose and stood in front of her.

"You know Honfleur? And the Côte de Grâce? Sit down, you're turning quite green. You know, on the Côte de Grâce that old gate where your mother and I always said each time we drove by . . ."

She turned toward Madame Peloux. Madame Peloux had disappeared. This discreet conniving flight, this fading away, was so little like the normal Charlotte Peloux that Léa and Chéri looked at each other and laughed with surprise. Chéri sat down and leaned against Léa.

"I'm tired," he said.

"You're ruining yourself," Léa said.

In his vanity he sat more erect. "Oh, I don't know. I'm still good enough."

"Good enough. Perhaps for others but not—not good enough for me, for instance."

"Too green?"

"Just the word I was looking for. Just between friends, why don't you come to the country? Ripe strawberries, fresh cakes and cream, broiled spring chickens . . . that'll be your diet and no women."

He let himself slip against Léa's shoulder and closed his eyes. "No women. Fine. . . . Léa, you'll be a real friend to me, won't you? Then let's go. . . . Women? I'm through with them. I've seen enough."

He said these things in a drowsy voice whose full soft force Léa caught with its warm breath against her ear. He had taken hold of Léa's long necklace and rolled the large pearls between his fingers. She put her arm beneath his head and, accustomed as she was to the boy, pulled him toward her without second thought and rocked him.

"How nice," he breathed. "You're going to be a real friend to me and this is so comfortable."

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She smiled as if highly praised. Chéri seemed to be sleeping. She looked down at his eyelashes, shining as though damp, spread on his cheek and at the cheek itself which bore the traces of fatigue without happiness. His upper lip shaved that morning was already turning blue and the pink lamps afforded his mouth a fictitious color of blood.

"No women," Chéri declared as if dreaming. "Then . . . kiss me."

Surprised, Léa did not move.

"Kiss me, I tell you." He made his demand, frowning, and the flash of his eyes, suddenly opened, confused Léa like a lamp suddenly re-lighted. She shrugged her shoulders and placed a kiss on his forehead. He locked his arms around her neck and pulled her toward him.

She shook her head but only until their lips touched. At that moment she became motionless and held her breath like someone listening. When he released her she detached herself, rose, breathed deeply and rearranged her hair which had not been disturbed. Then a little pale and her eyes darkened, she turned to him and said as if making a pleasantry: "That was clever of you."

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He moved to the depths of a rocking chair and said nothing while he brooded over her with a glance so energetic, so full of defiance and interrogations that she said after a moment: "Well, what is it?"

"Nothing," Chéri answered. "I found out something that I wanted to know."

She blushed, humiliated, but defended herself dexterously: "What have you found out? That your mouth pleased me? My poor boy, I've kissed uglier. What does that prove? You think I'm going to fall at your feet and beg you to make me yours? You must know nobody but young girls. Do you think I would lose my head because of a kiss?" She felt calmer in speaking and wished to show her nonchalance. "Listen, my dear," she said leaning over him. "Do you think that would be so rare among my memories—a handsome mouth?" She smiled from above him, sure of herself, but she did not know that something rested on her face, a sort of faint palpitation, an attractive sadness, and that her smile looked like those that follow on a fit of weeping. "I have nothing to be afraid of," she went on. "If we kissed again or even if we . . ." She stopped

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and made a gesture of contempt. "No. No, I really can't see us doing that."

"You didn't see us doing what we just did a moment ago either," said Chéri without haste. "But you gave it all your attention for several minutes. You've already thought of going further? It wasn't I that suggested it."

They took each other's measure like enemies. She feared to show a desire which she had not yet had time either to nourish or dissimulate, and she resented this youth, become chilled in a moment, perhaps mocking.

"You're right," she conceded lightly. "Let's say no more about it. Let us say instead that I offer you a nice country field for you to graze in and good food—mine, in other words."

"We'll see," responded Chéri. "Shall I bring along my Renouhard runabout?"

"Naturally, you're not going to leave it with Charlotte."

"I'll pay for the gasoline but you'll pay for the chauffeur's meals."

Léa burst out laughing. "I'll pay for the chauffeur? Ah, you're your mother's own son, all right. You never forget a thing. I'm not naturally curi-



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ous but I should like to hear what you call a tender conversation between you and a woman."

She sat down and fanned herself. A moth and insects with long legs turned about the lamps and the odor of the garden because of the coming of night became the odor of the country. A gust from the acacias bore down on them, so distinct, so powerful, that they both turned as if to see it arriving on foot.

"It's the acacias with the pink clusters," Léa said under her breath.

"Yes," Chéri said. "But tonight they've stolen their perfume from the orange trees."

She watched him, vaguely admiring his having thought of such an idea. He breathed the scent that victimized, contented him and she walked away, suddenly fearful that he might not recall her. But he called and she came toward him.

She came to kiss him with a burst of resentment and selfishness and thoughts of punishment.—Wait, she thought. Now it's my turn. It's only too true that you have a pretty mouth and this time I'm going to take my fill because I want to—and then I'll laugh at you, I'll walk off. What do I care? It's my turn. . . . Now. . . .

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She kissed him. They became drunk, deaf, breathless, trembling as if they had been fighting. She drew back above him, he not having moved from the depths of his chair, and she defied him half under her breath:—"Well? . . . Well?" and waited to be insulted. But he held out his arms, opened his beautiful vague hands, tilted his head as if struck and showed beneath his lashes the double brightness of two tears while he murmured words, complaints, a whole animal and amorous chant in which she distinguished her name, the words "darling," "together," "never leave you . . ." a chant which she heard, leaning over him with anxiety as if she had inadvertently wounded him.

Whenever Léa recalled her first summer in Normandy, she always said impartially: "In the way of spoiled brats, I've had several in my time who were more amusing than Chéri, also less disagreeable and more intelligent. But just the same I've never known one exactly like him."

"It's funny," she confided to Berthelley-le-Desséché at the end of the summer of 1906, "there are moments when I think I'm sleeping with a negro or a Chinaman."

"Have you ever had a Chinaman or a negro?"

"Never."

"Well?"

"I don't know. I can't explain it. But I have that impression."

It was an impression that had come to her slowly with at the same time an astonishment that she had not always known how to hide. The first souvenirs of their idyll consisted only of fine food, of choice fruits and of her worries as a country housewife with refined city tastes. In her mind she could still see Chéri, paler than ever in the sunlight, an exhausted Chéri who dragged about under the Norman hedges and slept on the warm banks of the ponds. Léa waked him to stuff him with strawberries, cream, frothy milk and chicken. As if in a daze he followed with wide empty eyes the flight of moths around the basket of roses on the dinner table, looked at his wrist watch to see if it were not time to go to bed, while Léa, deceived but without resentment, thought of the promises which the kisses at Neuilly had failed to fulfill. Until the end of August if necessary, I'll keep him out to graze. But once

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in Paris, *ouf!* I'll hand him back to whoever wants him.

She went to bed mercifully early so that Chéri, seeking refuge against her, pushing with his nose and forehead and selfishly hollowing out a fine place to relax, might sleep. Sometimes, the lamp extinguished, her eyes settled on a streak of moonlight glittering on the polished floor. Mixed with the quivering of the aspen tree outside and the shrilling of crickets which ceased neither by night or day, she listened to the breathing, deep like that of a hunting dog, which agitated Chéri's breast.

"What's wrong with me that I don't sleep?" she asked herself vaguely. "It's not his little head on my shoulder—I've held heavier. . . . What marvellous weather we're having. For tomorrow I've ordered some good porridge for him. He already has a little fat on his bones. . . . What's wrong with me that I can't sleep? Oh, yes, I remember I'm going to send for Patron, the boxer, to train the boy. With me on one side and Patron on the other, we'll show Madame Peloux something in the way of a son that will astonish her."

She fell asleep, a tall woman stretched beneath

clean sheets and on the flat of her back, the black head of her disagreeable young charge resting on her right breast. She slept, occasionally awakened—but how rarely—by some desire of Chéri's at daybreak.

The second month of their retreat finally brought Patron, his big valise, his little dumbbells of a pound and a half each, and his black tights, his four-ounce gloves and his boxing shoes laced down over his toes—Patron of the gentle voice, long eyelashes and fine tanned skin so much like that of his valise that he did not look naked when he took off his shirt. And Chéri, by turns spiteful, lazy, or jealous of the serene strength of Patron, began the painful and fruitful movements of slow and oft repeated gymnastics.

"One and . . . two and . . . I can't hear you breathing . . . three and . . . Don't think you're fooling me by bending your knee. . . ."

The foliage of the lime trees filtered the August sunlight. A thick red carpet spread on the gravel painted purple the nude bodies of the pupil and his teacher. Léa's eyes followed the lesson attentively. During the fifteen minutes of boxing, Chéri, drunk with his new strength and excited,

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tried unfair blows and turned red with fury. Patron stood up under his lunges like a rock and from the height of his glorious sportsmanship let fall on Chéri remarks which carried even more weight than his celebrated fist.

"Careful there. If I hadn't caught myself in time that wandering left eye of yours would have known what my right glove feels like."

"I slipped," said Chéri in a rage.

"It isn't a question of balance," continued Patron. "It's a question of morale. You'll never make a boxer."

"My mother is against it."

"Even if your mother weren't you'd never make a boxer because you're bad-tempered. A mean disposition and boxing don't go together, do they, Madame Léa?"

Léa smiled and tasted the pleasure of feeling warm, of remaining motionless and watching the game between two men, both stripped, both young, whom she compared in silence.—Isn't he a handsome creature, that Patron? He's fine, like a well-built house. And the boy is shaping up beautifully. One doesn't see knees like his every day or I'm no judge. His back is—no, will be—

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marvellous. How in the devil did Mother Peloux happen to have a child like that? His neck's set on his body like a perfect statue. And how mean he is. When he laughs one would swear it was a greyhound snapping. She felt happy and maternal, bathed in peaceful virtue. "I'd exchange him for almost anyone else," she would say to herself with Chéri at her side in the afternoon under the lime trees, or Chéri in the morning on her ermine rug, or Chéri in the evening by the edge of the tepid pond. "Yes, handsome as he is, I'd willingly exchange him if it weren't a question of principle." She confided her indifference to Patron.

"And yet," Patron objected, "the boy's well-built. Already he has muscles like some of those colored foreigners, though he's as white as milk. Nice little muscles that don't show much. You'll never see Chéri with biceps like cantaloupes."

"I should hope not, Patron. But personally, I didn't take him on for boxing, you know."

"Oh, naturally," acquiesced Patron, dropping his long lashes. "There's the heart interest that has to be considered." He was always embarrassed by Léa's unveiled sensual allusions and her smile; that insistent smile which she turned on him

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whenever she spoke of love. "Naturally," Patron started again, "if he isn't perfectly satisfactory. . . ."

Léa laughed. "Perfectly? Hardly. My sole pleasure comes from my impersonal interest in him. In this case I'm like you, Patron."

"Oh, I." He feared and hoped for the question which did not fail to follow.

"Still the same, Patron? You still stick to your point?"

"I still stick to it, Madame Léa. I just had a letter from Liane by the noon post. She says that she's alone, that I have no reason for being so obstinate, that her two friends have left."

"Well?"

"Well, I don't think it's true. And I'm obstinate only because she's obstinate. She's ashamed, she says, of a man who works for his living, above all a living which forces him to get up early in the morning, to train every day, to give boxing lessons and high class gymnastics. The moment we meet there's always a scene. 'You might think,' she says, 'that I'm not glad to support the man I love.' It's handsome of her, I don't deny it, but it isn't included in my set of ideas. I suppose



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I'm odd. As you so well put it, Madame Léa, it's an affair of principle."

They talked in low tones beneath the trees, he modest and half-naked, she dressed in white, her cheeks a vigorous pink. They savored the pleasure of their mutual friendliness born from similar tastes that led them toward simplicity, health and a sort of gentility of their low world. And yet Léa would not have been shocked had Patron received from the beautiful Liane who was having a great vogue, suitably magnificent presents. Give and take. And she attempted to break down what Patron called his oddness by antique arguments about justice. Their slow conversations which revealed each time the presence of their same gods—love and money—would drift away from both to come back to Chéri, to his faulty upbringing, to his extraordinary beauty which was "inoffensive on the whole," said Léa, and to his character which she had decided was absolutely non-existent. Long conversations which expressed their need for assurance and their horror of new words or ideas, speeches troubled by the unexpected appearance of Chéri whom they thought either asleep or motoring down some hot road—

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Chéri who loomed in sight half-naked but equipped with an account book and a pencil behind his ear.

"Here comes the chief clerk," Patron said cheerfully. "He's got the entire office force with him."

"What does this mean?" Chéri cried from afar. "This three hundred and twenty francs for gasoline? Somebody must be drinking it. We've been out four times in fifteen days. And seventy francs more for oil."

"The car goes over to the market every day," responded Léa. "And by the way, it seems that your chauffeur ate three helpings of mutton yesterday for lunch. Don't you think he's straining our contract a little? When the high cost of something sticks in your gullet you look just like your mother."

Devoid of reply, he rested a moment uncertain, oscillating on his slender feet, balancing with that flying grace of a young Mercury which always made Madame Peloux swoon with pride and squeal: "Me when I was eighteen! Feet with wings on 'em, feet with wings!" He hunted for some impudent reply and his face quivered, his mouth opened, his forehead dropped in a strained

expression which made obvious the peculiar diabolic twist of his eyebrows.

"There, there, don't try to think of anything," said Léa simply. "Yes, yes, you loathe me. Come here and give me a kiss. Handsome devil. Good-looking imp. Little fool."

He came, conquered by her voice and offended by her words. Before this astonishing couple Patron once again let the truth flower from his wise lips.

"For a good physique, Monsieur Chéri, you have a good physique. But whenever I look at you, it seems to me that if I were a woman I'd say, 'I'll come back again ten years from now.'"

"You hear, Léa? He says in another ten years," insinuated Chéri, evading the head of his mistress bent toward him. "What do you think of that?"

But she did not deign to hear and tapped her hand all over the young body which owed her its renewed vigor, touching it anywhere, on the cheek, the leg, the hip, with the irreverent pleasure of a child's nurse.

"What satisfaction does it give you to be unkind?" Patron demanded of Chéri.

Chéri slowly enveloped the Hercules in an im-

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penetrable barbarous glance before replying: "It consoles me. You wouldn't understand."

Truth to tell, neither had Léa managed to understand Chéri even at the end of three months of intimacy. If she still talked to Patron who only came now on Sundays, or to Berthelley-le-Desséché who arrived without being invited but left two hours later, about "giving Chéri back to whoever wanted him," it was because the phrase had become a sort of tradition and to excuse herself for having kept him so long. She continued delaying the day for his departure and delayed each delay. She was waiting.

"The weather is so fine. . . . And then his trip to Paris last week tired him. . . . And besides it's better that I really get fed up with him."

For the first time in her life she waited in vain for what had never before failed to arrive: the trust, the relaxation, confessions, truthfulness, the indiscreet expansiveness of a young lover—those hours all through the night when the quasi-filial gratitude of an adolescent unrestrainedly poured young tears, secrets and troubles on the warm breast of the ripe sure friend.

—I always had it before, she thought obstinately.

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So I always knew what they were worth, what they thought and what they wanted. But this brat, this boy—it's really too much.

Robust now, proud of his nineteen years, gay at table and impatient in bed, he gave nothing of himself except himself and so remained mysterious to Léa. He was tender if tenderness could be proved by his involuntary cries, the involuntary tightening of his arms. But his unkindness always returned to him with speech and the constant fear of being transparent to another human being. How many times at dawn Léa held in her arms a lover contented, assuaged, the eyes half-closed like his mouth into which life seemed to flow back each morning, each embrace making it handsomer than the night before: how many times, herself defeated in such an hour by her instinct to conquer and the voluptuous desire to hear a confession, had she pressed her forehead against his, murmuring: "Talk, say something. Speak to me."

But no avowals ever moved his curved lips and few words except sulky or wild apostrophes built about the name "Nounoune," which, though he had given it to her when he was a child, he now

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fell back on at the height of his pleasure like a cry for help.

"Really, I assure you he's like a Chinaman or a negro," she declared to Anthime de Berthelley and added, "I can't explain." She was nonchalant and awkward at defining her impression, strong but confused that she and Chéri did not speak the same language.

September had ended when they returned to Paris. The first evening Chéri went directly to Neuilly on purpose to astonish Madame Peloux. He tossed the chairs into the air, cracked nuts with a blow of his fist, jumped over the billiard table and played cowboy in the garden at the heels of the terrified watch dogs.

"*Ouf!*" sighed Léa on entering alone into her house in the Avenue Bugeaud. "How nice an empty bed is."

But the next night while she was sipping her coffee at ten o'clock and forbidding herself to find the evening long and the dining-room too big, the sudden apparition of Chéri, upright in the frame of the door, Chéri arrived on quiet wingéd feet, pulled from her a nervous outcry. Sulky, silent, he ran toward her.

"Are you mad?"

He shrugged his shoulders, disdainful of explanations, and merely ran toward her. He asked her no questions such as, "Do you love me? Have you already forgotten me?" He ran toward her.

Later in Léa's great metal bed, Chéri feigned sleep, weariness, the better to grit his teeth and batten down his eyes, a prey to his fury of speechlessness. But still she heard him, lying next to him, listened with delight to the delicate vibration, the distant and defeated tumult throbbing in a body that denied its agony, its gratitude and its love.

"Why didn't your mother tell me this herself last night at dinner?"

"She thought it better that I should mention it."

"No!"

"That's what she said."

"And you?"

"What about me?"

"You think it's better too?"

Chéri lifted an uncertain glance toward Léa. "Yes." He seemed to think a moment and repeated, "Yes, yes, of course, can't you see it is?"

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In order not to embarrass him, Léa turned her eyes toward the window. A tepid rain blackened the August morning and fell in straight lines on the three plantain trees, already turning rust-color, in the garden court. "It's like autumn," she said and sighed.

"What's the matter?" demanded Chéri.

She regarded him with astonishment. "Nothing. I simply don't like the rain."

"Oh, good. I thought that . . ."

"What?"

"I thought you were unhappy."

She was unable to check her frank laughter. "Unhappy because you're going to get married? Oh, no, listen, you're . . . you're absurd." She rarely laughed outright and her good-nature vexed Chéri. He shrugged his shoulders and lit a cigarette with his customary grimaces, his chin thrust out, his under lip protruding.

"You shouldn't smoke before lunch," said Léa.

He answered impertinently but she did not hear him, occupied as she was at listening to the sound of her own voice and the echo of her daily mechanical advice coming back in repercussion over a distance of the last five years. —It's like seeing



oneself in a series of mirrors, she mused. Then with a slight effort she tried to come back to reality and good humor. "I'm in luck, passing on to someone else the job of keeping you from smoking on an empty stomach."

"She's not going to have a word to say about anything," declared Chéri. "I'll marry her, you see? She'll have the privilege of worshipping at my feet and blessing the day she was born. And that's the way it's going to be managed."

He exaggerated the thrust of his chin, tightened his teeth on his cigarette holder, opened his lips and only succeeded in looking like an Asiatic prince in white pyjamas and with skin paled from the impenetrable darkness of the palace.

Léa, nonchalant in her dressing robe of a pink she called "chronic" with her, brought together the ideas which were tiring her and which, one after the other, she decided to throw against the feigned calm of Chéri. "Well, why are you marrying the little girl, then?"

His elbows on the table, he unconsciously imitated the set face of his mother. "Oh, you understand, dearie . . ."

"Call me Madame or Léa. I'm neither one of

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your housemaids nor a playmate of your own age." She lifted herself in her divan and spoke dryly without raising her voice. He wanted to make a quick reply, brave the beautiful face a little bruised under its powder, and the eyes which covered him with their frank blue light, but he softened and conceded in a tone which was not habitual to him:

"Nounoune, you asked me to explain to you. . . . It would have to happen some day anyhow. And besides there are big interests at stake."

"Whose?"

"Mine," he said without a trace of humor. "The girl has a large personal fortune."

"From her father?"

He rocked in his chair, his feet aloft. "Oh, how do I know? You ask too much. I suppose it's from her father, though. You wouldn't expect her highness Marie-Laure to draw fifteen hundred thousand out of her own bank account, would you? Fifteen hundred thousand and some high class jewels besides."

"And how much have you?"

"Oh, I've more than that of my own," he said with pride.

"Then why do you need any more money?"

He shook his smooth head where the daylight ran in waves. "Need . . . need . . .? You know we haven't the same ideas about money. So there's no point in our talking about it."

"I'll do you the justice to say that you've spared me from any references to it during the past five years." She leaned toward him and put her hand on his knee:—"Tell me, my dear, how much have you put by from your income in these five years?"

He jumped like a clown, laughed and rolled at Léa's ankles, but she pushed him aside with her foot. "No, tell me the truth. Fifty thousand a year? Sixty? Tell me. Seventy thousand?"

He settled on the carpet, leaned his head on her knees. "Wouldn't I be worth that much?"

He stretched himself at full length, turned his head, opened wide his eyes which seemed black but whose true color Léa knew to be a heavy rusted brown. As if to point out and choose what was finest among all his charms, she touched her forefinger to his lashes, his eyelids, the corner of his mouth. At moments the outward form of this lover whom she slightly despised inspired her with a kind of respect. To be as handsome as that amounts to a sort of nobility, she thought. "Tell

me, darling—and the young lady in the case—how does she feel toward you?”

“She loves me. She admires me. And she never says anything.”

“And you—how do you feel toward her?”

“I don’t feel at all,” he answered simply.

“What charming tender moments you must pass together,” said Léa dreamily.

He reared himself and sat tailor-fashion. “It seems to me that you think entirely too much about her,” he said severely. “Can’t you consider yourself at all in this tragedy?”

She gazed at Chéri with an astonishment which made her look young, her eyebrows lifted, her lips apart.

“Yes, you, Léa. You, the victim. You should have the sympathy in all this because I’m deserting you.” He had become a little pale and in his attack on her seemed also to wound himself.

Léa smiled. “But, darling, I have no intention of changing my life. For a week from time to time I’ll find a pair of socks, a cravat, a handkerchief, on my shelves. A week? Not even that. You know how often I tidy my shelves. Oh, yes,

and I'll have the bathroom redone. I've a notion to use encrusted glass. . . ."

She fell silent and took on a ruminative air, her finger tracing a vague plan in space. Still Chéri would not soften his vindictive manner. "But what is it you want?" she said. "Do you expect me to go to Normandy to hide my grief? To get thin? To stop dyeing my hair? To have your mother running to my bedside?" She imitated Madame Peloux's trumpet tones and flapped her arms.—"She's just a shadow of her former self, just a shadow of her former self. The poor thing has aged a hundred years, a hundred years. Is that what you want?"

He listened with a brusque laugh and a trembling of his nostrils which might have been emotion. "Yes," he cried.

Léa placed on Chéri's shoulders her heavy, bare, polished arms. "My poor boy. But at that rate I would already have been dead four or five times. To lose a little lover. . . . To exchange one disagreeable youngster. . . ." She added in a lower, lighter voice: "I'm used to it."

"It's a well-known fact," he said harshly. "I don't give a damn,—you hear me?—I don't care

a God damn that I wasn't your first lover. What I would have liked to be, or rather what I wished, what would be fitting, decent, is that I should be your last." With a turn of his shoulders he made fall her superb arms. "After all, what I am saying to you now is for your own good."

"I understand perfectly. You think only of me, I think only of your fiancée. It's marvellous, just what one might expect. It's plain to be seen that we're all noble, self-sacrificing souls." She rose, waiting for him to give her some blackguardly response but he said nothing and she suffered at seeing for the first time on Chéri's face a sort of discouragement. She bent and put her hands under his arms. "Now, now, come along, finish dressing. I have only to put on my frock, I'm ready underneath and what on earth can we do on a rainy day like this except to go to Schwab and pick out a pearl for you? After all I must certainly give you a wedding present."

He jumped up, his face shining. "Wonderful! Oh, yes, a pearl for my shirt front, a pale pink pearl, I know which one."

"Never in the world, a white one, something masculine, for pity's sake. Don't tell me, I know

## CHÉRI

which one just as well as you. It'll ruin me as usual. However, think of all the money I'm going to save once you're out of the house."

Chéri took on his reticent air. "Oh, that . . . that depends on my successor."

Léa turned at the threshold of the boudoir and showed her gayest smile, her strong sybaritic teeth, her eyes with their easily deepened blue. "Your successor? Forty sous and his pipe tobacco. Oh, and a glass of blackberry cordial on Sundays—that's all the job will be worth. And I'll settle money on all your offspring."

They both became very gay during the weeks which followed. The official betrothal of Chéri separated them for a few hours each day and occasionally for a night or so. "We mustn't make them lose heart," Chéri declared. Léa, whom Madame Peloux kept at a safe distance from Neuilly, satisfied her curiosity by plying Chéri with hundreds of questions, he being heavy with secrets which he scattered the moment he crossed her door sill, burlesquing everything as soon as he had Léa in sight.

"My friends," he cried one day, clapping his

hat on Léa's portrait bust. "My friends, wait till you hear what's been going on at the Peloux's palace since last night."

"Take your hat off of that in the first place. And secondly don't mention your lousy friends around here. Well, what is it now?" she scolded, already laughing in anticipation.

"A riot, Nounoune. A riot between the ladies. Marie-Laure and Ma'me Peloux have taken to pulling out each other's hair over my marriage contract—you know—whether the girl's money is to be put in my care or not. A riot, I tell you."

"No!"

"Yes! It was a superb sight. Be careful of the hors-d'oeuvres while I give you an imitation of Ma'me Peloux's arms. 'Separate bank accounts? Why not put a sheriff to over-see what my son does with the family cash? It's a personal insult, a personal insult. After all my son is monied in his own right, I want you to know, madame. . . .'"

"She called her madame?"

"Large as life. 'I want you to know, madame, that my son is used to money, that my son has never had a sou of debts since he came of age and the list of his investments bought since 1910 is



## CHÉRI

worth . . . ' is worth this, that, the other, including the end of my nose, plus the meat on my backsides. In brief, she was Catherine de Medici all over, only slightly more diplomatic."

Léa's blue eyes shone with tears of mirth. "Chéri, you've never been so funny since I've known you. And the other, her highness Marie-Laure—what was she like?"

"She? Oh, terrible, Nounoune. That woman must have left a trail of twenty-five dead men in her wake. Dressed up all in jade green, red hair as usual, marvellous complexion—in a word eighteen years old but with her smile. All my venerated parent's trumpeting failed to budge her an inch. She waited to the end of the solo to say, 'It would perhaps be better, my dear madame, not to talk too much about all the money your son saved in 1910 and the following years. . . .'"

"Bang! Right in the eye. Right in yours, I mean. Where were you when all this was going on?"

"I? In the big armchair."

"You were present?" She ceased laughing and eating. "You were there? What did you do?"

"Said something witty naturally. Ma'me Peloux

had already picked up one of her most valuable pieces of bric-a-brac to throw at Marie-Laure's head to avenge my honor when I stopped her without even leaving my seat. 'Dear, darling mother, calm yourself,' I said. 'Copy me, copy my charming mother-in-law who's as sweet as honey—or sugar.' And that's where I won the day. The marriage contract will be made out so that any money the girl may possibly—mind you, possibly—inherit after the wedding, will belong equally to both of us."

"But I don't understand."

"The famous sugar plantations which the poor little old Prince Ceste willed to Marie-Laure. . . ."

"Yes?"

"The will's illegal. The Ceste family's up in arms. There'll probably be a lawsuit. Now do you follow?" he crowed.

"I follow, but how did you know all that?"

"Ah-ha! The old Lili has just thrown herself at the head of the old prince's son who is seventeen years old and a good little boy."

"The old Lili? How awful!"

"And the Ceste boy murmured the family secrets while lying in Lili's arms. . . ."

## CHÉRI

"Chéri! You're making me sick."

"And the old Lili gave me the tip at mamma's at-home last Sunday. She adores me, that old Lili. She's very appreciative of me because I never tried to make love to her."

"I should hope not," sighed Léa. "And yet—" As she began reflecting Chéri felt she lacked enthusiasm.

"Well, aren't I smart? Aren't I?" He leaned over the table. The sunshine on its silver dishes was like a footlight brightening his face. "Don't you think so?"

"Yes." She thought: He doesn't resent it. That poisonous Marie-Laure treated him flatly like a renter—a sponger—a . . .

"Is there some *fromage à la crème*, Nounoune?"

"Yes." She thought: And he was no more offended than if she'd presented him with a flower for his button-hole.

"Nounoune, will you give me that address? The address of the place where you get your *fromage à la crème* for my new cook I've engaged for October?"

"What are you thinking of? My chef makes them here in the house. Your cook won't be capa-

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ble of much more than mussel stew and custards." And she continued to herself: I suppose it's true that for five years I've practically kept the boy. But just the same he has an income from three hundred thousand francs. Can a man be called a sponger who has three hundred thousand francs? Though why not, it doesn't depend on the money but on the man. There are men I could have given a half million to but they wouldn't have been spongers. But how about Chéri? After all I've never actually given him money. Just the same though . . . "Just the same," she burst into speech, "she treated you as if you were a disgusting little gigolo."

"Who did?"

"Marie-Laure."

He brightened up like a child. "Didn't she? Didn't she now? Nounoune, that's what she meant, didn't she?"

"I have that impression."

Chéri lifted his glass filled with Château-Chalon which was the color of brandy. "Then here's to Marie-Laure. Quite a compliment she paid me, eh? And if they can still say it about me when I'm your age, I won't ask anything better."

## CHÉRI

"If that's what will make you happy—"

She listened distractedly through the end of the luncheon. Accustomed to the half-silences of his reliable friend, he was satisfied with her constant maternal phrases: "Take the brownest crusts of bread. . . . Don't eat so rapidly. . . . You never know how to choose the best peach. . . ." All the while, secretly smouldering, she tried to calm herself by thinking:—At any rate I must make up my mind what it is I wanted. What did I expect him to do? Draw himself up and hiss, "Madame, you have insulted me. Madame, I am not the vile creature you think." After all, I'm the one who's really responsible. I've brought him up on a silver platter, I gave him everything he wanted. Who would ever have thought that one day he would want to play at being married? Certainly I never had such an idea. As Patron said, "Blood will tell." If Patron had ever accepted the propositions of his Liane and anyone had called him a gigolo, his blood would have boiled. But Chéri has Peloux blood. He's just straight Chéri. He's . . .

"What were you saying, my dear?" she interrupted herself to ask. "I wasn't listening."

## CHÉRI

"I said that nothing, absolutely nothing, will ever give me a bigger laugh than my tiff with Marie-Laure."

—There you are, Léa managed to tell herself, he only thought it was funny. She rose with a weary movement. Chéri put his arm about her waist but she evaded. "What day is your marriage?"

"A week from Monday."

He seemed so innocent and detached that she was bewildered. "But it's fantastic."

"Why fantastic, Nounoune?"

"You don't look as if you thought about it at all."

"I don't," he said tranquilly. "I don't have to. Everything's arranged. Ceremony at two o'clock which lets us out of inviting everyone to an expensive lunch. Tea at five at Ma'me Peloux's. And then the night train, private compartment, Italy, the lakes . . ."

"Are the lakes still being done?"

"They are. Then there'll be villas, and there'll be hotels, limousines and restaurants, and then there'll even be Monte Carlo, eh?"

## CHÉRI

"And the girl," she protested. "You've forgotten her."

"And the girl, of course. There's not much of her but she'll be with me."

"And I won't be, ever again."

Chéri did not expect her words and showed it. A sickened twist of his eyes and a sudden discoloration of his mouth disfigured him. He caught his breath with caution so she should not hear it and became himself again. "Nounoune, there'll always be you."

"Monsieur overwhelms me."

"There'll always be you, Nounoune. . . ." He laughed awkwardly. "As long as you can do anything for me."

She did not answer. Humming, she bent to pick up a pin of tortoise shell that had fallen and inserted it again in her hair. She prolonged her song complacently before the mirror, proud of having conquered herself so easily, of having successfully hidden the only emotional moment of their separation, proud of having held back the words which must not be said: "Speak, ask for whatever you want, demand it, put your arms about my throat, you have just made me happy."

## CHÉRI

Madame Peloux must have been talking a great deal and for a long time before Léa's entry. The fire in her cheeks added to the sparkle of her big eyes which ordinarily never expressed anything except indiscreet and impervious watchfulness. This Sunday she was wearing a black afternoon gown with an exaggeratedly tight skirt and no one could fail to see either her feet were tiny or that she was corseted too high. She stopped talking, took a little swallow from the goblet which was becoming tepid in her hand and bent her head toward Léa with happy languor. "Isn't it a beautiful day? Such weather! Such weather! Could anyone believe it was October?"

"Yes, could they? Oh, certainly not," two servile voices murmured.

A stream of red sage flowed down the length of the path between rivers of asters whose lilac was almost gray. Yellow butterflies flickered through the air as in summer but the smell of seasonal chrysanthemums over-heated in the sun, entered the open hall. A yellowing birch tree trembled in the wind above a rose arbor which captivated the last of the bees.

"But," suddenly declaimed Madame Peloux with



a lyric throat, "what's this weather compared to what *they* are having in Italy?"

"Just what I was thinking. Of course, of course," the servile voices piped up.

Léa turned her head toward them, frowning. —If only they would keep quiet, she thought.

Seated at a card table the Baroness de la Berche and Madame Aldonza were playing piquet. Madame Aldonza, an antiquated dancer with swaddled legs, suffered from rheumatism and wore her shiny black wig a little askew. Across from her and dominating her by a head and a half, the baroness squared her shoulders, broad as a country parson's, beneath a huge face which age had masculinized to an alarming degree. Her physiognomy consisted entirely of hairs in her ears, tufts in her nostrils, and on her lip a hirsute horde.

"Baroness, don't forget I made a run of ninety," bleated Madame Aldonza.

"Mark it up, mark it up, my friend. All on earth that I want is to see everyone happy." It was her habit to bestow ceaseless benedictions on all around her and thus hide her savage cruelty.

Léa looked at her with disgust as if seeing her for the first time and then back at Madame

Peloux. —At any rate, Charlotte looks human, she thought. She . . .

“But what’s the matter with you, Léa? Aren’t you feeling quite up to your usual self?” Madame Peloux inquired tenderly.

Léa stretched her handsome torso and answered: “Of course I am, Lolotte dear; it’s so comfortable here that I was merely enjoying myself.” She thought:—Careful. She’s ferocious like all the rest. At once she spread over her face a look of complacent content, of greedy revery, which she accentuated by sighing: “I lunched too well. I ought to lose weight. Tomorrow I’m going to start on a diet.”

Madame Peloux beat the air with her hands and simpered: “A broken heart isn’t enough to make you thin, eh?”

“Oh! Ho-ho! Ha-ha,” guffawed Madame Aldonza and the Baroness de la Berche. “Ha-ha-ha!”

Léa rose, impressive in her gown of toneless autumn green, handsome beneath her satin hat bordered with fur, youthful among all these relicts over whom she cast a sweet eye: “Oh, la-la,

my dears! Give me a dozen heart-breaks like that if you think it would help me to lose one pound."

"Léa, you're superb," the old baroness tossed her in a puff of smoke.

"Madame Léa, think of me please, when you decide to throw away that hat," begged the old Aldonza. "Madame Charlotte, you remember your blue one? It lasted me two years. Baroness, when you've finished ogling Madame Léa will you please hand me the cards?"

"There they are, my sweetheart, and here's hoping they'll bring you luck."

Léa waited a moment on the threshold of the hall, then descended into the garden. She plucked a rose whose petals fell off in her hand, listened to the wind in the birch tree, to the tramways, to the sounds from the avenue, to the whistle of the local train. The bench on which she sat was warm and she closed her eyes, letting the sun heat her shoulders. When she opened her eyes she hurriedly turned her head toward the house with the certainty that she would see Chéri standing in the entry to the hall, leaning against the door.—What can be the matter with me? she asked herself.

Outbursts of shrill laughter, a little chorus of

greeting in the hall brought her to her feet trembling slightly.—Am I developing nerves?

“Ah, there they are, there they are,” trumpeted Madame Peloux. And the heavy bass voice of the baroness chanted: “Here comes the happy pair.”

Léa shook, ran to the entry of the hall and stopped herself. Before her was the old Lili and her young lover, the Prince of Ceste, who were making their entry.

Perhaps seventy years old and with the fleshiness of a corseted eunuch, it was usually said of the old Lili that she was beyond the pale without making clear of what the pale consisted. An eternal childish gaiety lighted her round pink painted face where the circular eyes and the tiny mouth, fine and shrunken, coquetted shamelessly. The old Lili followed the fashions without restraint. A striped skirt of war-like blue held in the lower part of her body, a little blue jacket yawned around her bare chest whose skin was wattled like a tough turkey-cock's. A silver fox failed to hide her naked neck, shaped like a flower-pot—a neck as thick as a stomach and which had already swallowed up her chin.

"She's frightening," thought Léa. She was unable to tear her eyes from certain particularly sinister details—the white felt sailor hat, for instance, childishly cocked on the wig of short hen-naed hair, and the necklace of pearls, one moment visible and the next lost to sight in the gully of wrinkles which had once been a girdle of Venus.

"Léa, Léa, duckie, dear," cried the old Lili, hurrying toward Léa. She moved with difficulty on her bloated round feet, cluttered with leather straps and paste buckles and herself was the first to remark on the fact. "I waddle something awful, it's a little way I have. Guido, sweetie, you remember Madame de Lonval? Don't remember her too well or I'll scratch your eyes out."

A slim youth with a tapering Italian figure, huge empty eyes, a weak sloping chin, hastily kissed Léa's hand and moved to step back into the shadows without having said a word. Lili caught him in flight, pulled his head down to her horny chest, calling the ring of onlookers as witness: "Do you know what this is, Léa? Ladies, this is the love of my life."

"Pull yourself together, Lili," advised Madame de la Berche in her bass voice.

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"Why? But why?" cried Charlotte Peloux.

"Out of decency," said the baroness.

"Baroness, that's not nice of you. I think they're sweet. Ah," the mother sighed, "they remind me of my own two children."

"I thought of them," said Lili with a happy smile. "It's our honeymoon too. Speak up, Guido. Indeed we've come just to ask news about the other happy young couple. We've come to hear every single little thing. Everything!"

Madame Peloux became stern: "Lili you don't expect me to give you spicy details, do you?"

"Oh, yes, yes," cried Lili clapping her hands. She tried to skip but only succeeded in rotating her shoulders and hips a little. "That's always been my besetting sin and always will be. Curiosity. Nobody can cure me. Ask that big scoundrel there, he knows already."

The silent youth, put to the test, refused to open his mouth. His black eyes rolled round in his white face like frightened insects. Stunned, Léa watched him.

"Madame Charlotte told us all about the wedding ceremony," bellowed Madame Aldonza. "It

seems that in her wreath of orange blossoms the bride looked a perfect dream."

"Like a madonna, like a madonna," rectified Charlotte Peloux at the top of her lungs and with a burst of religious fervor. "Never, never did anyone look so divine. My son was walking on clouds, on clouds, I tell you. What a couple they make, what a couple!"

"You hear that, sweetie—all about the orange blossoms?" murmured Lili. "And, tell me, Charlotte, how about our mother-in-law, Marie-Laure?"

"Oh, her! Out of place, absolutely out of place. She looked like an eel, dressed in skin-tight black and I swear you could see her breasts, her stomach—everything, everything!"

"The hussy!" roared the Baroness de la Berche with the delighted gusto of an old soldier.

"And that air she always has of being better than everybody else, of having poison in one pocket and a knife in the other all ready to slit you up the back. As I said, out of place completely. She acted as if she could only waste five minutes on us, she hardly wiped her mouth off with her napkin before she said, 'Au revoir, Edmée, au revoir, Fred,' and away she went."

## CHÉRI

The old Lili was breathing hard, sitting on the edge of her chair, her little ancestral mouth with its puckered corners hanging half open. "And who gave them the little talk?"

"What little talk?"

"The little talk—sweetie, hold my hand while I say it—the little talk that somebody always gives young people who've just been married. You know. Who told them?"

Charlotte Peloux measured her with an angry glance. "Maybe they used to do that when you were young but it's not done any more."

The old girl settled her fists on her thighs and said coarsely: "Isn't done any more? How would you know anything about the style in marriages? There's precious little marrying done in your family!"

"Oh! Ha-ha!" the two helots imprudently guffawed. But a single glance from Madame Peloux silenced them.

"Peace, peace, little birds in their nests should agree. Everybody here lives in a perfect paradise on earth and we should be full of love for our fellow-men." And Madame de la Berche stretched



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out a peaceful policeman-like arm between the lowering heads of the ladies.

But Charlotte Peloux was like a war-horse that had smelled the smoke of battle. "If you're looking for trouble, Lili, you won't have any trouble finding it. Considering your age, I ought to treat you with respect but if it weren't for that—"

Lili shook with laughter from head to foot. "If it weren't for that, you'd get married just to call me a liar, eh? Ho-ho, it's not hard to get married. I could marry Guido in a minute if he was only of age."

"No!" gasped Charlotte, forgetting the fight.

"I'm telling you. Princess Ceste, my dear, the *piccola principessa*. *Piccola principessa*, that's what my little prince always calls me." She pulled at her skirt in turning and displayed a gold bracelet strapped around the place where her ankle should have been. "Only," she continued mysteriously, "his father . . ." By now out of breath, she made a sign to the silent young man who continued in a low rapid voice as if it were a recitation learned by heart:

"My father, the Duke of Parese, will put me in a convent if I marry Lili."

"In a convent?" squealed Charlotte Peloux. "A man in a convent?"

"A man in a convent, did you say?" whinnied Madame de la Berche in an agitated bass. "Well, I'll be damned if that isn't exciting!"

"They probably don't know any better where he comes from," Aldonza lamented, joining her misshapen hands together piously.

Léa arose so suddenly that she upset a glass of wine.

"It's white glass," said Madame Peloux in satisfaction. "To break white glass brings good luck. You'll bring good luck on my happy young couple. But where are you running off to? Are you afraid your house is on fire?"

Léa managed a sly smile. "On fire? Well, in a way. . . . Ssh, no questions. It's a secret."

"What? Already? It's not possible!" Charlotte Peloux cackled with eagerness. "I was just saying to myself that you looked as if—"

"Tell us, tell us everything," the three oldest girls clamored.

The quilted fists of Lili the deformed stumps of Aldonza, the hard fingers of Charlotte Peloux had seized on her wrists, her sleeves, her gold

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mesh-bag. She pulled herself away from all these claws and managed to laugh again teasingly. "No, no. It's too soon, it would spoil everything, it's my secret. . . ." And she rushed into the vestibule.

But the door opened before her and a dried old gaffer, a sort of playful mummy, took her into his arms. "Léa, lovely creature, give your dear old Berthelley a kiss or he won't let you pass."

She cried out with fright and impatience, struck off the gloved bones which restrained her and fled.

Neither in the avenues of Neuilly nor in the wooded alleyways of the Bois, blue under a hasty twilight, did she give herself a moment to think. She shivered slightly and closed the door of her car. The sight of her well-ordered house, of her pink bedroom and boudoir, over-crowded with furniture and flowers, comforted her. "Quick, Rose, light the fire in my room."

"But the house is warm, madame, the heat is turned on full as if it were already winter. Madame was foolish to go out with only that little

furpiece around her neck. The evening air is treacherous."

"Put the hot-water bottle in my bed at once and for dinner bring me a big cup of thin hot chocolate beaten up with the yolk of an egg, a roast and some grapes. Hurry, my friend, I'm freezing. I caught cold in that junk shop at Neuilly."

In bed she gritted her teeth to prevent their chattering. The warmth of the bed relaxed her stiffened muscles but she still refused to give up and concentrated on the expense book of Philibert, the chauffeur, until she received her chocolate which she drank boiling. She chose her hot-house grapes one by one, balancing the cluster still attached to its stem, a long cluster of greenish amber when held toward the light. Then she turned out the lamp on her night table, stretched herself in her favorite pose, flat on her back, and relaxed.

"What's the matter with me?"

She was seized again by anxiety, by a trembling. The vision of an empty door obsessed her—the door of the hall flanked by two tufts of red sage.

—It's unhealthy, she thought. One doesn't get into a state like this for a door.

She also saw again the three oldest girls as well as Lili's neck and the beige coat that Madame Aldonza had trailed about in for the last decade.

—Which one of them am I going to look like ten years from now? she wondered.

But this prospect did not frighten her. Still her anxiety grew. She wandered from one incident to another of her past, from this scene to that, in an effort to free herself from the picture of the empty door framed in scarlet flowers. She felt lonely in her bed and trembled slightly. Suddenly a pain so keen that at first she thought it was physical stirred her, twisted her mouth and pulled from her in a racuous breath a sob and a name: "Chéri."

This was followed by tears which she could not control at once. As soon as she could dominate herself, she sat up, dried her face and lit the lamp. —Good, she thought. Now I understand.

She took a thermometer from her night table and placed it in the pit of her arm. —My temperature's perfectly normal. So whatever I have is not physical. I know. I'm suffering, that's it. We'll have to do something about this.

She took a drink; rose, washed her inflamed

eyes, powdered herself, poked the fire and lay down again. She felt cautious and full of defiance against an enemy she had never known—grief. Thirty years which had been spent living easily, pleasantly, often in love, occasionally avaricious, had just fallen away from her and left her at almost fifty, young and unused. She jeered at herself, no longer felt her pain and smiled. —I must have been out of my mind a moment ago. I'm quite all right now.

But a movement of her left arm, involuntarily opened and curved to hold and shelter a sleeping head, brought back all her agony and she sat up with a jerk. "Well, that's going to be nice," she said in a loud severe voice.

She looked at the clock and saw that it it barely marked eleven. Above her head the slippered tread of old Rose passed, reached the staircase leading to the servants' quarters beneath the roof and was heard no more. Léa resisted her impulse to call this deferential old spinster to her aid. —Careful, don't give the servants anything to gossip about. We don't want that.

She left her bed, wrapped herself warmly in a quilted silk bathrobe and warmed her feet by the

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fire. Then she opened her window and leaned out to listen for she did not know what. A softer and humid wind had brought clouds with it and what leaves were left on the trees in the Bois close at hand rustled beneath the attacks of the breeze. Léa closed the window, picked up a newspaper and read the date: —The twenty-sixth of October. Just a month ago today Chéri was married.

She never said, "since Edmée was married."

In imitation of Chéri, she had not yet counted as among the living his young shadow of a wife. Chestnut eyes, ashy-blond hair which was beautiful and a little too curly—everything else about her melted when recalled, like the contours of a face one has seen in a dream.

"They're in each other arms in Italy at this time of night, of course. And that—all that—makes no difference to me." She was not boasting. The picture she made of the young couple, the familiar embraces it brought to her mind, even the face of Chéri, fainting for a moment, a line of white showing between his eyelids sapped of strength—none of these aroused either curiosity or jealousy in her. But instead the animal-like convulsion seized her again, brought her low as her eyes fell on a nick

in the gray enamel of her wood-work—a mark of some brutality of Chéri's.

—“The lovely hand which here left its trace is now turned from you forever,” she quoted. How well I recite! At this rate grief is going to make me positively poetic.

She walked, she sat down, she went to bed and waited for day. At eight o'clock Rose found her writing at her desk, a sight which upset the old maid.

“Madame's not ill?”

“Not ill, not well. I'm not so young as I was, Rose. The doctor thinks I ought to have a change of air. You'll come with me, eh? It's going to be a cold winter here. We'll go south and eat in the sun.”

“But just where are we going?”

“You want to know too much. Simply have my trunks brought up. Get out my fur rugs and give them a good beating.”

“Madame is taking her car with her?”

“I think so. In fact I'm sure of it. I'll want everything to make me comfortable. For once, Rose, I'm going alone. It's going to be a pleasure trip.”



## CHÉRI

For five days Léa rushed about Paris, wrote, telegraphed and received telegrams and letters from the south of France. And she departed from Paris, leaving for Madame Peloux a letter which was brief but which she had started three different times.

*"My dear Charlotte,*

*Don't be angry if I leave without saying good-bye to you and without telling you my little secret. I'll always be a lunatic for the sake of love! And why not? It's a short life, let's make it a merry one.*

*I send you my best. Remember me to the boy when he returns.*

*Your incorrigible,*

LÉA.

*..P. S. Don't take the trouble to come interviewing my butler or the concierge.. No one at my house knows anything at all."*

"Do you know, dear heart, that I don't think you're looking very well?"

"It's having spent all night in the train," Chéri answered briefly.

Madame Peloux did not dare say all she thought. She had found her son greatly changed. —He's —yes, now he's positively irresistible-looking, she decided, and said loudly with enthusiasm: "It's the effect Italy had on you."

"If you want to put it that way," conceded Chéri.

Mother and son had just finished breakfasting together and Chéri with a few well-chosen blasphemies had deigned to praise the Peloux Palace coffee—a sugared coffee, pale with cream which, once boiled, had been placed to simmer again on a slow fire after having been covered with morsels of buttery toast which browned at leisure and hid the rich beverage under their succulent crusts.

He was cold even in his white woolen pyjamas, and clasped his knees in his arms for warmth. Charlotte Peloux, hoping to find favor in her son's eyes, had put on a new yellow bathrobe and worn a breakfast cap fitted tight around her temples which gave her face a look of sinister importance.

While her son stared at her, she simpered: "You see? I've decided to become old-fashioned. Do you like this cap? It's regular eighteenth century, don't you think? Something like DuBarry or Pompadour. How do I look in it?"

## CHÉRI

"Like an old convict," Chéri snapped. "You oughtn't to put on a thing like that without giving people warning."

She moaned, then guffawed. "Ha-ha-ha! Darling, you certainly have a poisonous tongue."

But he did not join her in her laughter and stared out into the garden where the light snow from the night before still lay on the grass. The spasmodic twitching of muscles along his jaw was the only sign he gave of his nervousness. Madame Peloux, intimidated, copied his silence. The trill of a distant bell sounded.

"That's Edmée, ringing for her breakfast," said Madame Peloux.

Chéri did not answer. "What's the matter with the heat? It's cold here," he said a moment later.

"That's what Italy's done for you," repeated Madame Peloux lyrically. "You come back from there with sun in your heart and in your eyes. And here you land at the North Pole. Positively at the North Pole. The dahlias didn't have a chance to bloom for even a week. But don't worry, sweetheart—precious. Your little love-nest will soon be done. If the architect hadn't come down with typhoid, it would be ready to step into

## CHÉRI

now. I warned him; I said to him twenty times if I said to him once, "Monsieur Savaron——"

Chéri who was at the window turned suddenly: "Was that letter dated?"

Madame Peloux opened her large infant-like eyes: "What letter?"

"That letter from Léa which you just showed me."

"It wasn't dated, my love, but I remember I received it Saturday before my last Sunday at home in October."

"I see. And you don't know who it is?"

"Who what is, sweetheart?"

"Who that fellow is, you know—whoever she went away with?"

The naked face of Madame Peloux became malicious: "No. Just imagine it, nobody has any idea. The old Lili is in Sicily and none of the ladies who come here has the slightest clue. A mystery, a deep mystery. However, you know me, I've picked up a few bits of reliable information here and there. . . ."

Chéri's dark eyes swelled. "Well? What's the gossip?"

"It seems it's a young man," whispered Madame

Peloux. "A young man and not particularly nice, you understand what I mean—But very good-looking, of course." She made up what she could, careful to assume the worst.

Chéri finally shrugged his shoulders. "Good-looking, did you say? Don't make me laugh. Poor Léa, I can see him from here—probably a little thug like Patron with black hair on his fists and wet hands. . . . Well, I'm going back to bed. You make me sleepy."

His feet trailing in his mules, he started for his room, dawdling in the long corridors and on the large landings of the house which he seemed to be discovering for the first time. He ran into an enormous pot-bellied wardrobe and was astonished. —Damned if I knew that thing was there. Oh, yes, I remember vaguely. And who in the devil can this old freak be? He peered at an enlarged photograph, funereally hung in its black frame near some object in polychrome faïence which Chéri was equally unfamiliar with. Madame Peloux had been installed in this house for twenty-five years and kept *in situ* each unfortunate example of her ridiculous collective instinct. "Your house looks like the nest of a magpie that's gone

off its head," she had been reproached by the old Lili who had a hearty appetite for the paintings, and above all the painters, of the modern school.

To which Madame Peloux replied: "I believe in letting well enough alone. Did one of her corridors of sickening green—a hospital green, Léa called it—need renovating, Charlotte Peloux ordered it painted again in the same sickening green and to re-upholster one of her ruby plush sofas, hunted all over town for the same ruby plush."

Chéri paused by the open door of a dressing-room. The red marble of the washstand was fitted with white wash basins with engraved initials and ornamented with electric lights molded in the shape of lilies trimmed with beads. Chéri lifted his shoulders to his ears as if a current of cold air had reached him: —Good God, it looks like an auction room.

He lengthened his steps. The end of the corridor through which he strode finished off in a window bordered with red and yellow stained glass. "I only needed that," he grumbled. He turned to the left and noiselessly opened a door—the door of his old room—without even knocking. A small outcry rose from the bed where Edmée

had just finished breakfasting. Chéri closed the door and looked at his young wife without coming any closer.

"Good morning," she smiled. "You seemed surprised to see me here."

The reflections from the snow outside shed on her a blue steady light. Her hair was hanging. Its crinky ashy-brown locks fell over but failed to cover her beautiful sloping shoulders. With her cheeks, pink and white as her nightgown, her pink mouth which fatigue made pale, she was like a new picture, not quite finished and seen from too far away.

"Aren't you going to say good morning to me, Fred?" she insisted.

He sat down beside his wife and took her in his arms. She fell back softly, carrying him with her. He leaned on his elbows the better to see close at hand this creature who was still so new that weariness could not fade her. Her lower lid, padded, full and without a line, seemed particularly to amaze him—that and the suavity of her golden cheek.

"How old are you?" he asked suddenly. Edmée opened her eyes which she had tenderly closed.

## CHÉRI

Chéri saw the chestnut color of her eyes and her small square teeth which her laughter uncovered.

"Oh, come now. I'll be nineteen the fifth of January and I hope you'll try to remember it."

He brusquely withdrew his arm and the young woman slipped into the hollow of the bed like a scarf thrown aside.

"Nineteen years old—as much as that, eh? Do you know that I'm more than twenty-five?"

"But of course, Fred, I know it."

He took from the night table a blond tortoise shell mirror and gazed at himself. "Twenty-five years old."

Twenty-five and with a face of white marble that seemed indestructible. Twenty-five but at the outer corner of the eye and directly beneath, delicately repeating the design with which antique sculptors once treated the lid, were two lines, visible only in full light, two incisions made by the most relentless and light of hands. He replaced the mirror. "You're younger than I am. That seems strange to me."

"Not to me," she answered in a biting voice filled with hidden meaning.

But he did not stop there. "Do you know why



## CHÉRI

I have beautiful eyes?" he asked her in all seriousness.

"No," said Edmée. "Perhaps because I love them?"

"That's just being poetic," said Chéri, shrugging his shoulders. "The real reason is because I have an eye shaped like a sole."

"Like a what?" she exclaimed.

"Like a sole." He sat down near her in order to make his demonstration. "Look, it's like this, the corner close to the nose, that's the head of the sole. And the upper curve, that's the back of the fish; while the under line is perfectly straight,—that's his belly. And then the corner of the eye which slopes toward my temple, that's the sole's tail."

"Ah?"

"Yes, but if I had an eye shaped like a flounder, that is to say, as much curved at the bottom as on the top, then I'd look stupid. See? You've been to college. Well, did you know all that? Did you?"

"No, I admit that I . . ." She stopped, feeling guilty because he had spoken sententiously and with exaggerated force as is the habit of certain

extravagant natures. —At moments he looks like a savage, she thought. Like someone from the jungle. But he doesn't know anything about plants or animals and sometimes he doesn't even seem to know anything about people.

Chéri, seated against her, held one arm about her shoulder and with the other hand played with the small, round but flawless and perfectly matched pearls of her necklace. She breathed in the scent which Chéri used to excess and, intoxicated, drooped like a rose in an over-heated room. "Fred, come back to bed. We're both tired."

He seemed not to hear. He stared at the pearls with an obstinate and frightened look.

"Fred."

He started, leaped to his feet, tore off his pyjamas in a fury and threw himself naked into the bed, seeking a place for his head on a shoulder where the delicate bones were still sharp with youth. Edmée obediently received him with open arms. Chéri, motionless, closed his eyes. Cautiously she remained awake, a little smothered by his weight and thinking him asleep. But after a moment he turned from her with a bound, imi-

## CHÉRI

tated the snoring of a heavy sleeper and rolled himself in the sheet at the other side of the bed.

"He always does that," Edmée declared.

She was to awaken during the entire winter in this square room with its four windows. Inclement weather delayed the completion of the new mansion in the Avenue Henri Martin and also the caprices of Chéri who wanted a black bathroom, a Chinese drawing-room, a swimming pool and a gymnasium in the basement. To the architect's objections he said: "I don't give a damn. I'm paying and I'm going to have what I want. I don't care what it costs." But now and then he went through the estimates furnished him with an eagle eye, warning that "no one was going to trim the young Peloux." Indeed he discoursed on factory prices, fibro-cement and colored stucco with unexpected glibness and a memory for figures which demanded the contractor's respect.

He rarely consulted his young wife though for her benefit he paraded his authority over the workmen and took care to hide his occasional mistakes by giving sharp orders. She discovered that he knew by instinct how to use colors but that he

## CHÉRI

despised beauty of form and all the characteristics of styles.

"You simply clutter up your head with all that stuff, dearie—er, Edmée. An idea for the smoking-room? All right, here's one. A blue for the walls, a blue that isn't afraid of anything. And a violet carpet that knows the blue isn't afraid. Then, to go with all that, don't stint on black or gold either for the ornaments and furniture."

"Yes, you're probably right, Fred. But all these strong colors will be a little harsh. The room ought to have grace, have a light note in it, a white statue or vase. . . ."

"Nonsense," he interrupted rather rudely. "The white vase'll be me with nothing on. And don't forget a cushion or pillow, some kind of pumpkin yellow thingimajig for me to loll on, on those occasions."

By turns secretly revolted or excited, her mind was filled with these pictures which transformed their future dwelling place into a sort of questionable palace, a temple to the glory of her husband. But she did not oppose his wishes, merely begging gently for a little corner of her own in which to hang her minute and precious furnish-

ings of tapestry woven on white, a present from Marie-Laure.

This gentleness that hid a determination which, though young, was already practised, allowed her to camp out for four months at her mother-in-law's and to evade traps laid fresh every day of the visit—traps for her happiness, her gaiety which was still susceptible, for her tact. Charlotte Peloux, excited by the proximity of so tender a victim, lost her head a little and wasted her poison, striking right and left.

"Control yourself, Madame Peloux," Chéri advised her from time to time. "There won't even be any bones left for you to pick by next winter if you don't call a halt now."

Edmée looked at her husband with eyes in which fear and gratitude trembled together and tried not to think too much about Madame Peloux nor to look at her too often. One evening at dinner Charlotte, as if at the height of her heedlessness, three times tossed across the chrysanthemum centerpiece the name of Léa instead of Edmée.

Chéri lowered his devilish eyebrows: "Madame Peloux, I gather that your memory is breaking

down. Do you think anything short of solitary confinement will cure it?"

Charlotte Peloux did not say a word for a week but Edmée never dared to ask her husband: "Was it because of me that you were angry? It was I you defended, wasn't it? It wasn't the other woman—the one before me?"

Her childhood, then her adolescence, had taught her patience, hope, silence and the easy manipulations of the weapons and virtues of all prisoners. Her highness Marie-Laure had never scolded her child; she merely punished her. Never a hard word and never a tender one. Solitude, then boarding school, then the loneliness again of summer holidays and her frequent relegations to her own pretty room; finally the threat of a marriage, any kind of marriage, as soon as the eye of the too beautiful mother noted in her child the unclosing of another beauty, a timid beauty like that of the oppressed and therefore all the more moving . . . In comparison with this mother of hard ivory and gold, the moon-faced malice of Charlotte Peloux seemed like a bed of roses.

"Are you afraid of my venerated parent?" Chéri demanded one evening.

Edmée smiled, made a small grimace. "Afraid? No. A door slamming can make one jump but it doesn't make one afraid. What I'm afraid of are snakes in the grass."

"Marie-Laure is a pretty perfect snake, eh?"

"Pretty perfect."

He waited for further confidences which did not come and with a comradely gesture threw his arm over his wife's slender shoulders. "You and I are orphans in a way, eh?"

"Yes, we're orphans. We're nice little orphans." She clung to him. They were alone in the big hall. Madame Peloux, as her son said, was upstairs mixing her poisons for the next day. The night, already cold behind the windows, mirrored the furniture and the lamps as in a pond. Edmée felt warm and protected, confident in the arms of this unknown. She tilted her head and cried out with shock, for he lifted toward the light overhead a face which was magnificent and desperate, closing his eyes over two tears, captured and glistening between his lashes.

"Chéri, Chéri, what's the matter?" In spite of herself she had used this tender nickname which she had hoped never to pronounce. He answered

## CHÉRI

its call with bewilderment and turned his gaze on her. "Chéri, oh God, I'm frightened. What is wrong with you?"

He held her before him at arm's length. "Poor child, poor little thing. What is it you're afraid of?" He turned toward her his eyes of velvet, handsomer for their tears and peaceful, wide-open, inscrutable. She desired only that he would not talk, but he continued: "How silly we are . . . that idea that we are orphans . . . it's idiotic—it's so true."

He immediately resumed his air of comical importance and she breathed with relief, knowing that now he would speak no more. He began snuffing out the candles with his usual care and then said to Edmée with a vanity which was either naïve or very shrewd: "After all why shouldn't I be sentimental like everyone else?"

"What are you doing there?"

Though his question came quietly, the sound of Chéri's voice thrust Edmée forward as if she had been pushed. Still standing close to the desk which opened wide, she spread her two hands on some scattered papers.



## CHÉRI

"I'm putting these in order," she said feebly. She lifted one hand which stopped in midair as if it had become numb. Then she seemed to come out of her torpor and ceased lying: "Listen, Fred. You told me you hated getting ready to move to our new house and looking after all your things—all your belongings in this room, the furniture . . . I only wanted to help, to put your possessions in order, sort them out . . . And then the temptation came, and bad impulses . . . a bad impulse . . . I ask your forgiveness. I touched things which didn't belong to me." She trembled bravely and waited.

His head was bent, his hands knotted in a menacing gesture but he seemed not to see his wife. His expression was so veiled that she always saved out of this hour the impression of once having held a conversation with a man who had white eyes.

"Ah, yes," he said finally. "You were hunting—you were hunting for love letters." She did not deny it. "You were looking for my love letters."

He laughed his awkward strained laugh.

She blushed, wounded. "Obviously you think I'm stupid. I should have known that you'd be

## CHÉRI

the kind of man who would have decently put them in a safe place or burned them. And anyhow, they're none of my business. I've got just what I deserved. You won't hold it too much against me, Fred?" Her petition cost her a certain effort and she tried to look appealing, her lips drooping, the upper half of her face secreted in the shadow of her frothy hair. But Chéri's attitude did not change and she noted for the first time that his skin which was ordinarily only without shadow had taken on the waxiness of the white winter rose and the oval of his cheeks had thinned.

"Love letters," he repeated. "It's too killing."

He took one step and grasped a fistful of the papers which he scattered. Postal cards, checks from restaurants, announcements from shop-keepers, telegrams from dancing girls met one night and never seen again, *pneumatiques* from hangers-on hunting a free meal, three lines, five lines; several narrow pages armed with the sabre-like script of Madame Peloux.

Chéri turned again toward his wife. "I haven't any love letters."

"Oh," she protested. "Why do you—?"

## CHÉRI

"I'm telling you the truth," he interrupted. "It's nothing you'll understand. I never noticed it myself until now. It's not possible for me to have any love letters because—" He checked himself. "Oh. Wait. Wait. There's just a chance that once . . . I remember now when I didn't want to go to La Bouboule and . . . Wait a minute, wait." He jerked open drawers, feverishly tossed the papers on the floor. "That's too much. What have I done with it? I could have sworn it was in the upper left hand corner. . . . No."

He slammed back the empty drawers and fixed his wife with a heavy stare. "You didn't find anything? You didn't take a letter which began, 'But of course I'm not lonely. I regard a separation of one week out of every four as an excellent plan,' and then went on to something else, I don't remember what, in connection with a honeysuckle vine which bloomed outside a window. . . ." He stopped merely because his memory carried him no farther, leaving him gesturing with impatience.

Edmée, hardened and thin before him, did not falter: "No, no, I took nothing, mind you," she insisted with dry irritability. "Since when have I been apt to take things? But how do you happen

## CHÉRI

not to know exactly where it is, this particularly precious letter that you can't find? A letter like that—I don't need to ask if it was from Léa."

He winced slightly but not as Edmée had expected. An errant half-smile wandered over his handsome detached face and with head tilted, eyes attentive, the arch of his mouth beautifully stretched, he listened perhaps to the echo of a name . . . All the young and undisciplined amorous force of Edmée's nature burst open in cries, in tears, in gestures of her hands, first knotted then extended to scratch: "Go away, I hate you. You've never loved me. You don't pay any more attention to me than if I didn't exist. You wound me, you despise me, you're coarse, you're . . . you . . . You only think of that old woman. It's unhealthy, it's degenerate, it's . . . You don't love me. Often I ask myself why you married me. You're . . . You . . ."

She shook her head like an animal that had been seized by the throat and when, suffocating, she lifted her head to breathe, there became visible the shining, milky little pearls of her necklace. Chéri contemplated with stupor the incoherent stretchings of her charming graceful throat, the

appeal of her hands knitted one to the other, and above all, her tears, her tears. . . . He had never seen so many tears. . . . Who had ever cried before him or because of him? No one. Madame Peloux? —But the tears shed by Madame Peloux wouldn't count, he thought. Léa? No. . . . In the most hidden depths of his memories he consulted, as if for authority, two honest, blue, sincere eyes which had never sparkled except for pleasure, malice and a tenderness that was always a little mocking. What a quantity of tears she shed, this young woman who was struggling before him! What did one do in the presence of so many tears? He did not know. Still he stretched out his arms and as Edmée drew back, perhaps fearing some brutality, he placed his hand—beautiful, soft, scented—on her frantic head and patted it while trying to imitate a voice and words whose power he knew well: “There, there . . . Now what's all this? . . . What's it all about, eh? . . . There, there.”

At once Edmée collapsed and fell on a sofa where she rolled in a heap and began to sob with a passion, a frenzy, that rose in swells like laughter or the jerky rhythms of joy. Her pretty body shook, exalted by grief, jealousy, anger and a

## CHÉRI

servility of which she was unaware; and yet like a wrestler fighting for his life, like a swimmer in the hollow of a wave, she felt bathed in an element which was new, natural and bitter.

She cried for a long time and came to herself slowly over moments of calm still crossed by shudders and gasps for breath. Chéri had seated himself near her and continued to caress her hair. He had passed the high point of his own emotion and was tiring. He glanced at Edmée, thrown at an angle across the straight couch, dissatisfied that her straggling body with its lifted skirt its trailing scarf, should augment the disorder in the room.

As soft as his sigh of boredom was, she heard it and sat up. "Yes," she said, "I'm more than you can stand. . . . It would be better to . . ."

He interrupted her, fearful of a torrent of words. "It's not that. It's simply that I don't know what you want."

"What I want?" she echoed. "What I—" She lifted her face, still sick with tears.

"Now listen to me."

He took her hands. She tried to free herself.

## CHÉRI

"No, no, I know that tone of voice. You're going to treat me to some long harangue that I won't understand. When you start to talk and look like that I know you're going to prove that your eye is shaped like a super-brook-trout or that your mouth looks like the figure three upside down. No, no, I don't want any of that."

Her recriminations were childish and Chéri relaxed on realizing that they were both very young. He shook her warm hands which he still held. "But listen to me," he insisted. "Good God, I'd like to know what you have to reproach me with? Do I ever go out at night without you? No. Do I leave you often during the day? Do I keep up a secret correspondence?"

"I don't know if you do—I don't think that you do."

He turned her from side to side like a doll held in his hands. "Have I a separate room from yours? Don't I make love well?"

She hesitated, smiled, delicately suspicious. "Do you call that love, Fred?"

"There are other words for it but you wouldn't appreciate them."

"What you call love . . . isn't it possible that

## CHÉRI

it is . . . is perhaps only a sort of alibi on your part?" She added hurriedly: "I'm just generalizing, Fred, you understand. I say 'perhaps' . . . in certain cases . . ."

He dropped Edmée's hands. "That," he remarked coldly, "was perfectly the wrong thing to say."

"Why?" she demanded in a feeble voice.

His chin in the air, he whistled, removing himself from her by several steps. Then he came toward her again, looking her over as if she were a stranger. A wild beast has no need to leap in order to promote fear. Edmée saw that his nostrils were flaring and the tip of his nose was white.

"Ugh," he breathed contemptuously, looking at his wife. He lifted his shoulders and walked away. At the end of the room he turned and came back. "Ugh," he repeated, "look what's talking."

"What?"

"Look what's talking and what it says. What cheek, my word!"

She rose in a rage. "Fred," she cried, "don't dare to speak to me again in that tone. For whom do you take me?"



"For a woman who knows the perfectly wrong thing to say—and says it, as I just had the honor of informing you." He touched her shoulder with a hard finger. She suffered as if it had made a bruise. "You, who've had a college education, isn't there some kind of proverb that says 'Don't play with fire?'"

"Yes," she said mechanically.

"Well, my child, don't play with fire. In other words don't wound a man . . . in his favors, if I may so express it. You wounded me in my gifts of love to you. . . . You wounded me in the favors I bestowed on you."

"You—you talk like a cocotte," she gasped. She blushed and became weak. She hated him for remaining pale, for retaining a superiority of which the entire secret lay in the carriage of his head, the steadiness of his limbs, the easy gait of his shoulders and arms.

The hard forefinger once more indented Edmée's shoulder. "Pardon. Pardon me. I'll probably astonish you in stating that on the contrary it's you who think like a whore. In estimating such little matters as the pretty ladies there's no one who's more an authority than the young

## CHÉRI

Peloux. I'm fairly well informed about 'cocottes' as you call them. I know them inside out. A 'cocotte' is a lady who usually arranges to receive more than she gives. You hear me?"

What she actually heard was the distant formal tone in his voice.

"Nineteen years old, white skin, hair which smells like vanilla; and in bed, closed eyes, dangling arms. All of it very pretty but has it anything that's so unusual? Do you really think it's so rare?"

She shook at each word and each stab roused her for the duel of the female against male. "It's barely possible it's quite rare," she said in a firm voice. "Though how would you know?"

He did not reply and she hastened to take her advantage: "Personally, I saw men in Italy who were handsomer than you. The streets are full of them. My nineteen years are worth what any other girl's are worth, just as one handsome young man is no better than another. Come, come, everything can be arranged. . . . Nowadays marriage is simply a yardstick that doesn't measure anything. Instead of embittering ourselves with silly scenes . . ."

He stopped her with a shake of the head that was almost merciful. "My dear child, it's not so simple as that. . . ."

"Why not? There's such a thing as quick divorce if one's willing to pay." She spoke in the pathetic peremptory voice of a runaway school girl. Her hair, pushed back from her forehead, the soft and enfolding slope of her cheek made all the more sombre her anxious and intelligent eyes—unhappy woman's eyes, matured and definite in a still un-ripened face.

"That wouldn't help anything," said Chéri.

"Why?"

"Because"—He bent his forehead, his eyelashes seemed revelled out into two winged points: he closed his eyes and then opened them as if he had swallowed a bitter dose. "Because you love me."

She only noticed the intimate tone again and above all the sound of his voice, full, a little stifled, the voice of their happiest hours. She acquiesced in the very center of her being: —It's true, I love him. For the moment there is no help for us.

The bell for dinner sounded in the garden, a bell which was too small and which ante-dated Madame Peloux—a bell, sad and clear like that

of a provincial orphan asylum. Edmée shivered. "Oh, I don't like that bell."

"No?" said Chéri, absentmindedly.

"In our home dinner will be announced. There'll be no bell. In our home there are not going to be any boarding-house manners. You'll see, in our home—"

She talked while hurrying down the hospital-green corridors, without turning or seeing behind her the savage attentiveness Chéri bestowed on her last words or his sneering smile.

He walked along lightly, stimulated by the dull spring which could be verified only in the irregular humid wind or in the scent cast up from the parks and private gardens. A mirror recalled to him from time to time in his progress that he was wearing a becoming felt hat pulled over his right eye, a light loose overcoat, pale heavy gloves and a terra-cotta colored cravat. The silent homage of women followed him, the most candid among them offering him that stupefaction that they could no more feign than hide. But Chéri ignored women in the streets. He had just left his mansion in the Avenue Henri-Martin where for the benefit

## CHÉRI

of the decorators he had left orders which were contradictory but delivered in the sure tone of authority.

At the end of the Avenue he breathed deep of the herbaceous smells which came from the Bois on the wet heavy wing of the west wind, and hurried his steps toward the Porte Dauphine. In a few minutes he gained the lower end of the Avenue Bugeaud and there stopped short. For the first time in six months his feet were treading a familiar path. He unbuttoned his coat.

—I walked too rapidly, he thought. He took a few steps then stopped once more and this time his glance was settled on a precise point. Fifty feet away, bareheaded and his chamois-skin in his hand, the concierge, Ernest—Léa's concierge—was polishing the brass on the gate in front of Léa's house. Chéri began to hum as he walked until he noticed by the sound of his voice that he had never known how to hum, so he stopped.

"Everything all right, Ernest? Hard at work as usual?"

The concierge brightened respectfully. "Monsieur Peloux. It's a pleasure to see monsieur again, monsieur hasn't changed a hair."





## CHÉRI

"Nor you either, Ernest. Madame is well, I trust?" He spoke only in profile, his eyes attentively observing the closed shutters on the second floor.

"I suppose so, monsieur, all we've had has been a few postal cards."

"Where from? From Biarritz, I believe?"

"I—I don't think so, monsieur."

"Where is madame?"

"It would be difficult to tell monsieur that. We send her mail—and there mostly isn't any—to madame's solicitor."

Chéri pulled out his wallet, affixing Ernest meantime with an affectionate eye.

"Oh, Monsieur Peloux, money between us? Oh, you wouldn't do that. Anyhow, even a thousand francs couldn't make a man tell something he doesn't know. But if monsieur would like to have the address of madame's solicitor?"

"No, thanks, it's of no consequence. And when is she coming back?"

Ernest lifted his arms. "Another question that's beyond me. Maybe tomorrow and maybe next month. But still I keep everything clean as a pin for we never can be sure of madame. If you said



to me now, 'There she comes around the corner of the avenue,' I wouldn't be any more surprised than you."

Chéri turned and looked at the corner of the avenue.

"That's all Monsieur Peloux wants of me? Monsieur just happened to be walking by? It's a fine day. . . ."

"Yes, thanks, Ernest. Au revoir, Ernest."

"Always at moniesur's service."

Chéri walked as far as the Place Victor-Hugo, swinging his stick. He stumbled twice and almost fell down, like people who fancy they are being spied on. At the balustrade which framed the entry to the Metro he stopped, leaned his elbows on the railing, stared into the rose and black shadows of the pit and felt crushed with fatigue. When he finally lifted himself he saw that the lamps had been lighted in the square and that night had colored everything blue.

"No, it's not possible. . . . I must be ill."

He had been at the bottom of a deep revery and came back to life painfully. The necessary words finally emerged. "Come, come now, for the love





## CHÉRI

of God. Young Peloux, are you off your track, my boy? Don't you know it's time to go home?"

This final phrase brought back to him a picture which the last hour had been capable of extinguishing: a square room, the big room Chéri had had ever since he was a child, a worried young woman waiting by the window and Charlotte Peloux, sweetened by a Martini cocktail.

"Oh, no," he said aloud. "No. That's finished."

With his lifted stick he stopped a taxi.

"Take me to—er—to the Restaurant du Dragon Bleu."

He crossed the grill room to the sound of violins, bathed in a ferocious glare of electricity which he found stimulating. The maître d'hôtel remembered him and Chéri shook his hand. Before him rose a hollow tall young man and Chéri sighed affectionately: "Well, Desmond. The very person I wanted to see. What luck!"

The table they selected was garnished with pink carnations. A small hand and an enormous aigrette trembled in Chéri's direction, launched from the next table.

"It's Loupiote," Desmond warned him.

## CHÉRI

Chéri did not recall the lady who was known under this title but he smiled at her enormous aigrette and without rising touched her little hand, located at the end of a cheap paper fan. Then with his air of solemn conqueror, he eyed an unknown couple near by because the woman had forgotten to eat ever since Chéri had sat down in her vicinity.

"The man with her looks like a deceived husband, eh? Poor old thing." To murmur these words he leaned toward his friend's ear and the pleasure in his eyes twinkled like an inundation of tears.

"What do you drink since you're married?" demanded Desmond. "Camomille tea?"

"I drink Pommery," said Chéri.

"And before the Pommery?"

"Pommery—before and after." And, flaring his nostrils, he inhaled in memory the sparkling rose-like odor of some old champagne of 1889 which Léa had reserved for him alone.

He ordered his dinner like a milliner on a spree—cold fish *au porto*, roasted birds and hot soufflé whose inner cave was filled with a sour red ice.

"Heigh-ho," cried Loupiote, waving a pink carnation in Chéri's direction.

## CHÉRI

"Heigh-ho," responded Chéri, lifting his glass.

The chime of an English time-piece on the wall struck eight. "Oh, damnation," grumbled Chéri. "Desmond, ring up someone for me on the telephone."

Desmond's pale eyes brightened with the expectation of interesting revelations.

"Ask for Wagram 17-08 which is my mother's house, and tell her that you and I are dining together."

"And if it's the young Madame Peloux who comes to the telephone?"

"Say the same thing. I'm a free man, don't forget. I've got her well trained."

He drank and ate a great deal, careful to appear serious and blasé. But the slightest outburst of laughter, the tinkling of a glass, the slimiest waltz, augmented his pleasure. The hard blue of the mirrored walls made him think of the Riviera at the hours when the sea, too blue, blackened at noonday beneath the melting disk of the sun. He forgot the habitual coldness which was a part of his rôle and began sweeping his most professional glances over the dark lady across from him, a creature on whom each glance left its mark.

"And Léa?" Desmond suddenly demanded.

Chéri did not tremble: he was already thinking of Léa. "Léa? She's in the Midi."

"It's all over between you?"

"Oh, naturally, you understand. We separated in good style, the best of friends. It couldn't go on forever. But what a charming, what an intelligent woman, my boy. However, you knew her yourself. Broadminded. Truly remarkable. I don't mind admitting to you, old man, that if there hadn't been the question of age between us. . . . But there was a question of age, and of course, you understand. . . ."

"Oh, perfectly," Desmond interrupted.

The young man with discolored eyes who knew from the bottom up his hard and difficult job of being a perfect parasite, had indiscreetly yielded to his curiosity and scolded himself for it. Chéri, however, perfectly circumspect and completely drunk, continued to talk about Léa. He said all the correct things redolent of domestic good sense. He praised marriage while giving Léa's virtues their due. He vaunted the submissive sweetness of his young wife in order to find an opportunity to criticize Léa's independent character. "Oh, that

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old war-horse. I don't mind telling you that she had ideas of her own."

He went farther with his confidences, he went so far in the matter of Léa as to treat her with severity, with impertinence. And all the while he talked, sheltered behind his ridiculous words which fanned in him that defiance peculiar to a persecuted lover, he savored the subtle happiness of being able to talk of her without danger. A little more and, in celebrating within his heart all the memories he had of her, he would have sullied her sweet and soft name which he had not been free to speak for six months, and the whole merciful vision he retained of her, bent over him with her two or three irreparable deep wrinkles, her beauty, lost for him but, alas, always present.

About eleven o'clock they rose to go, chilled by the emptiness of the restaurant. However, at the next table Loupiote was dashing off a few letters and called for more paper. She lifted her inoffensive sheep-like face toward the two friends as they passed.

"Well," she said, "and don't you even say good night?"

"Good night," Chéri conceded.



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Loupiote called her girl friend to witness what a fine young man Chéri was. "Pretty as a picture and plenty of cash to boot. Some people have everything in this world." But when Chéri offered her nothing more than a cigarette from his case she became embittered. "Some people have everything except the gift of knowing what to do with what they've got. . . . Run home to mama, duckie."

"Which reminds me," said Chéri to Desmond when they reached the street, "which reminds me that I wanted to ask you, Desmond. . . . But wait till we're out of this mob."

The soft and tepid evening had collected sidewalk strollers but the boulevard, after the Rue Caumartin, was still awaiting the rush from the closing theatres. Chéri took his friend's arm. "Listen, Desmond. . . . I want you to telephone for me."

Desmond stopped in his tracks. "Again?"

"Call Wagram—"

"17-08."

"You're the man of my dreams. Telephone and say I've been taken ill at your house—where do you live, by the way?"

"At the Hotel Morris."

## CHÉRI

"Perfect. Say I'll be home tomorrow morning—say you're making me a hot grog. Here. Either give this to the telephone girl or keep it yourself. Don't make me wait. I'll be on the terrace of Weber's café."

The tall, useful and haughty young man departed, crumpling the banknotes in his pocket and without making any reply. He returned to Chéri who was bent over an orangeade still intact and in which he seemed to be reading his fortune.

"Ah, Desmond. Who came to the telephone?"

"A woman," his messenger answered laconically.

"Which?"

"I don't know."

"What did she say?"

"That it was quite all right."

"In what tone of voice?"

"The same as I used just now."

"Ah. Good. Thanks."

It was Edmée, Chéri thought. They walked toward the Place de la Concorde and Chéri hung on Desmond's arm. He did not dare admit that he felt weary.

"Where do you want to go?" Desmond demanded.

## CHÉRI

"Listen, old man," Chéri said with gratitude, "let's go to the Morris at once. I'm dead."

Desmond forgot his customary impassibility. "What? Honestly? We're going to the Morris at this time of night? But what for? You're joking. Do you mean you want to—"

"Sleep," said Chéri. And he closed his eyes as if ready to collapse, then opened them. "Sleep, sleep, you understand?"

He clung without strength to his friend's arm.

"Right. Come along, then," said Desmond.

In ten minutes they were at the Morris. The sky-blue and ivory of the bedroom; the sham Empire of the little salon smiled at Chéri like old friends. He took a bath, borrowed from Desmond a silk night shirt that was too small, lay down and, wedged between two large soft pillows, sank into happiness without dreams, a sleep which was black and thick and which guarded him on all sides.

He counted the shameful days which then began. Sixteen, seventeen. . . . When three weeks are up I'll go back to Neuilly. But he did not go home. Lucidly he took the measure of a situation which he no longer had the strength to remedy. At night

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or sometimes in the morning he would flatter himself that his cowardice would have ended within a few hours. You haven't got the courage? Oh, excuse me, excuse me. . . . You haven't got the courage *yet*. . . . But it will come. When the clock strikes twelve what won't I bet that I'll be in the dining-room in the Boulevard d'Inkermann? One, two. . . . The stroke of twelve found him in the bathtub or driving his automobile with Desmond at his side.

Meal-time always gave him a moment of domestic optimism as punctual as a recurrent fever. Sitting down like a bachelor with Desmond, he always saw Edmée and thought in silence of the inconceivable deference his young wife always showed him. She's too nice, really, that sweet child. No one ever heard of a little wife as perfect as she. Never a word, never a complaint. I'm going to take her one of those big bracelets when I go home. Ah, training, that's it. Show me anyone who's the equal of Marie-Laure when it comes to bringing up a young girl. But one day in the grill room of the Morris the appearance of a green gown with a chinchilla collar, a costume something like one of Edmée's, turned him pale with fright.

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Desmond found life wonderful and grew a little fat. He regained his old-time haughtiness only during the moments when Chéri, solicited by him to visit some English charmer, extraordinarily full of vice, or some Indian prince in his opium den, refused flatly or consented with unconcealed contempt. Desmond no longer understood Chéri but at any rate Chéri paid and better than he had during the days of their adolescence. One night they ran into the blond Loupiote at the house of her friend whose real and wan name no one could ever remember: "What's-her-name—you know—the pal, the *copine* of Loupiote."

La Copine, thus called, smoked opium and helped others to do the same. Even in the entry way her modest flat started to smell of escaping gas and the drug which had been allowed to cool, but she conquered her guests by a tearful cordiality and a constant encouragement to be sad which was not entirely inoffensive. Desmond was received by her as a "great big desperately heartbroken boy," and Chéri as a "spoiled beauty who has everything, including all that can make him unhappy." But Chéri did not smoke, looked at the box of cocaine with the repugnance of a cat looking at a bottle of

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castor oil and sat up almost all night on the matting, his back against the wall between Desmond who was asleep and La Copine who never stopped smoking. Almost all night, wise and defiant, he smelled the odor of that which satisfies both hunger and thirst and seemed perfectly contented except when he regarded with a painful and questioning intensity the faded throat of La Copine—a throat which was red and rough and about which shimmered a string of artificial pearls.

Once Chéri stretched his hand and with the tip of his fingers caressed the henna-tinted hair on the back of her neck: he weighed her large, empty, light pearls, then pulled back his hand with the nervous shiver of someone who has caught his finger-nail on worn silk. Shortly after he arose and departed.

“Haven’t you had enough?” Desmond demanded of Chéri. “Enough of these infernal holes where you eat, where you drink, where you never touch a woman, and this hotel where they’re always slamming doors? Enough of cabarets in the evening and of eternally driving your sixty horse power from Paris to Rouen, from Paris to

Compiègne, from Paris to Ville-d'Avray. Why not the Riviera? It's not December or January that's the chic season down there, it's March, it's April, it's . . ."

"No," said Chéri.

"Well?"

"Well, nothing."

He became affable without becoming sincere and took on what Léa formerly called his air of worldly superiority.

"My boy, you seem not to appreciate the beauty of Paris at the moment. This . . . this indecision, this springtime without sun, this soft grey light . . . whereas the banal brilliant Riviera. . . . No, you might as well know it, I like it here."

Desmond almost lost his servant-like patience. "Yes, and maybe the divorce of the young Peloux. . . ."

Chéri's sensitive nostrils faded white. "If you've made your usual private arrangement with some lawyer, both you and he can give up hope. There'll be no divorcing for the young Peloux."

"My dear fellow," protested Desmond trying to look hurt. "You have a curious way of speaking

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to a childhood friend, one who on every occasion has always—”

Chéri did not listen. He turned in Desmond's direction a pointed chin, a mouth which he pinched into that of a miser. For the first time he had heard a stranger disposing of his own worldly possessions.

He reflected. A divorce for the young Peloux? He had considered it many hours of the day and night and the very words had come to represent freedom, a sort of recovered youth, and perhaps something better still. . . . But the voice, purposely nasal, of the Vicomte Desmond had aroused in him the necessary picture: Edmée leaving the house at Neuilly, resolute in her little automobile hat and her long veil, departing toward some unknown man. Obviously that would settle everything, admitted Chéri, bohemian even in his thoughts. Yet at the same time another Chéri who was singularly timorous, resisted recalcitrantly: No. That's not the thing to do. The picture became more precise, gained in colors and movement. . . . Chéri heard the solemn musical sound of the closing gate and on the other side of the grill saw a white naked hand, a grey pearl, a white diamond. . . .



"Farewell," the small hand waved.

Chéri rose, pushing back his chair.—"They're mine, he thought. All of them. The woman, the house, the rings, they all belong to me.

He had not spoken aloud but his face expressed such savage violence that Desmond thought the end of his days in clover had arrived. Chéri was moved to pity without becoming benevolent. "Poor pussy-cat, I frightened you, eh? Ah, the worn-out old aristocracy. Come along, I'll buy you some underdrawers as good as my shirts and some shirts as good as your underdrawers. Desmond, is it the seventeenth of the month today?"

"Yes, why?"

"The seventeenth of March. In other words, spring. Desmond, smart people, but I mean the really chic lot, women or men, won't be able to wait much longer before ordering their new spring wardrobes, will they?"

"Hardly."

"The seventeenth, Desmond. Come along, then, everything's going to be all right. We're going to buy a big bracelet for my wife, an enormous cigarette holder for Ma'me Peloux and a little wee scarf-pin for you."

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In this fashion, two or three different times, he had the overwhelming presentiment that Léa was going to return, that she had already arrived, that the shutters on the second floor, now opened, gave a glimpse of the pink ruffles at the window sills, the network of the huge lace curtains, the gold of the mirrors. The fifteenth of April passed and Léa had not yet appeared. Irritating events illumined the sombre flow of his life. There had been the visit from Madame Peloux who thought she was breathing her last before a Chéri thin as a greyhound, his mouth closed and his eyes wandering. There had been the letter from Edmée, a letter entirely, surprisingly calm, in which she explained that she would remain at Neuilly "until further orders" and added that Madame de la Berche sent her best regards. He thought she was making fun of him, didn't know what to reply and finished by throwing the incomprehensible letter away. But he did not go to Neuilly. In proportion as April, green and cold, flowering with pawlonia, tulips, with hyacinths in pots and laburnum in yellow clusters, perfumed Paris, Chéri buried himself alone in austere seclusion. Desmond, ill-treated, galled, discontented but well-paid, was alternately commis-

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sioned to protect Chéri from familiar young females and indiscreet young men or to go out and fetch both to make up a small regiment which ate, drank and screamed between Montmartre, the restaurants in the Bois and the cabarets of the Left Bank.

One night La Copine who was smoking alone and bewailing all evening a grave infidelity on the part of her friend Loupiote, saw enter her rooms the young man with the satanic eyebrows. He demanded cold water for his handsome and changed mouth which some secret heat had made dry. He did not show the slightest interest in the misfortunes of La Copine which she narrated at length while pushing toward him the laquer tray and the pipe. He accepted only his place on the matting, the silence and the half-obscurity, and rested there until dawn, economical of his movements like someone who fears if he moves to reveal a wound. At daybreak he demanded of La Copine: "Why weren't you wearing your pearls today, you know, your big pearls?" and politely took himself off.

He formed the unconscious habit of walking at





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night alone. His rapid, lengthy stride led him toward some goal which was distinct but inaccessible. Past midnight he would escape Desmond who would find him toward dawn on his bed in the hotel, sleeping flat on his stomach, his head between his folded arms, in the position of a child with a sorrow.

Oh, there he is—all right, then, thought Desmond with relief. With a lunatic like that one never knows. . . .

One night when the solitary Chéri was walking wide-eyed in the dark, he turned up the Avenue Bugeaud because he had not yet given in all day to his superstition which took him back there once every forty-eight hours. Like those eccentrics who cannot go to sleep without having first touched the door knob three times, he invariably rubbed along the gate, put his finger on the bell and called under his breath, as if it were a joke, "Hello, there," and then went away.

But one night, a certain night while he stood before the grill, a lump rose in his throat, then sank to strike at his heart. The electric globe in the court glimmered like a mauve moon above the portal, the door of the service entry, wide open,

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brightened the pavement and on the second floor the light from the room inside sifted through the shutters in the form of a golden comb.

Chéri leaned his back against the closest tree and hung his head. "It's not true," he said. "I'll close my eyes and when I open them again everything will be black as usual."

He straightened at the sound of the voice of Ernest, the concierge, who called in the corridor: "Tomorrow morning at nine o'clock, exact, Marcel and I will bring up the big black trunk, madame."

Chéri turned precipitately and ran as far as the Avenue du Bois where he sat down. The electric globe which he had looked at in the court danced before his eyes, a dark purple ball edged with gold and now suspended between him and the black of the still meagre spring trees. He pressed his hand to his heart and took a deep breath. The night smelled of lilacs in bloom. He tossed his hat to one side, opened his coat and sprawled against the back of the bench, stretched his legs and his opened hands drooped weakly. A suave and suffocating weight had just settled over him.

"Ah," he said in a low voice. "Is this happiness? I didn't know."

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He took time to regard himself with pity and then with contempt for all that he had missed in his miserable life—the life of a rich young man with a small heart—then he ceased thinking for a moment or perhaps an hour. At the end of that time he was able to believe that he wished for nothing else on earth, not even to go to see Léa.

When he shook with cold and the blackbirds cried the dawn he rose, stumbling, light, and took the direction of the Hotel Morris without even passing by the Avenue Bugeaud. He stretched himself, swelled his lungs and overflowed with a feeling of forbearance for all mankind.

Now, he thought, exorcised, now how nice I'll be to Edmée.

Up at eight, shaved, dressed, feverish, Chéri shook Desmond who slept lividly and looked revolting, swollen by slumber like a drowned man.

"Desmond, hey, Desmond. . . . Stop it. You're too hideous when you sleep."

The sleeper sat up and turned on Chéri eyes which were the color of muddy water. He pretended stupor to prolong his cautious examination of Chéri—Chéri dressed in blue, pathetic and superb



pale under a velvet coating of powder perfectly applied. There were still hours when Desmond with his affected ugliness suffered because of Chéri's handsomeness. He yawned on purpose and at length. What's he done now, he wondered while gaping:—That idiot is better-looking than he was yesterday. Especially his lashes, his lashes are—He stared at Chéri's lashes, lustrous and thick, and at the shadow they shed over the brown-black and blue-white of his eye. Desmond also remarked this morning that the contemptuous arched lips were open, moist, refreshed and panting a little as if after some hasty voluptuous moment.

Then he relegated his jealousy to the far plane of sentimental cares and questioned Chéri in a tone of weary condescension: "May one inquire if you're going out at this hour of the morning or just coming in?"

"I'm going out," said Chéri. "Don't bother about me. I have errands to do. I'm going to the florist's. I'm going to the jeweler's, to see my mother, to see my wife, to see—"

"Don't forget the Pope."

"Why not?" answered Chéri. "I'll take him

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some solid gold collar buttons and a bunch of orchids."

Chéri rarely responded to a pleasantry, ordinarily receiving them in icy silence. The importance of his facetious reply therefore informed Desmond of the unwonted condition his friend was in. He considered the reflection of Chéri in the mirror, noted the pallor of his dilated nostrils, the wandering motion of his glance and attempted only the most discreet inquiry: "Are you coming back to lunch? . . . Hey, Chéri, I'm talking to you. Are we lunching together?"

Chéri shook his head. He whistled lightly on seeing his reflection in the oblong mirror, exactly waist length like the one in Léa's room between the two large windows. Soon that mirror's heavy gold frame would serve as a mounting for his reflection on a background of sun-strewn pink, his image naked or draped in loose silk, his portrait as a handsome beloved young man, happy, pampered, playing with the rings and necklaces of his mistress. . . . Perhaps it's already there in Léa's mirror—the reflection of a young man? This thought cut across his exaltation with such virulence that, thinking he had seen it, he gasped.

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"What did you say?" Desmond demanded.

"I didn't say anything," his easy-going friend of a moment ago answered formally. "It's someone talking in the court."

Chéri left Desmond's room, slammed the door and closed himself in his own rooms. The Rue de Rivoli, awakened, filled them with a soft ceaseless tumult and Chéri could see through the opened window the spring foliage, stiff and transparent like jade knives in the sun. He closed the window and sat down on a useless little chair which filled a melancholy corner between the wall, his bed and the bathroom door.

"How does it happen," he began in a low voice and then fell silent. He did not understand why in the space of six and a half months he had never thought about the lover of Léa. "I'll always be a lunatic for the sake of love," said Léa's letter which Charlotte had piously saved.

A lunatic for love? Chéri shook his head. It's curious but I don't see her as that. What kind of man could she be in love with? Something like Patron? More than than one like Desmond, naturally. A little Argentine with waxed hair? Hardly. . . . But still. . . . He smiled with

## CHÉRI

naïveté. Outside of me who could really please her? A cloud passed over the sun and the room became dark. Chéri leaned his head against the wall. Nounoune, my Nounoune. . . . Have you deceived me? Have you disgustingly deceived me with someone else? . . . Have you done that to me?

He whipped his unhappiness with words and pictures which he constructed painfully, astonished and without rage. He tried to bring to mind morning pastimes with Léa, the delicious sleepiness of winter in the warm bed and the cool room with Léa. But either in the pink daylight which glowed within her curtains or in the afternoon, he always saw in Léa's arms one lover, only one lover: Chéri. He rose as if brought to life again in an impulse of spontaneous faith.

It's quite simple. If I'm not able to see anyone else near her, it's simply that there isn't anyone else to see.

He seized the telephone, almost called her and hung up the receiver softly. None of that, now.

He walked out, erect and squaring his shoulders. His open motor took him to the jeweler's where he grew tender over a slender little bandeau of

burning blue sapphires mounted in invisible blue metal, just the thing for Edmée's hair, which he took with him. He bought flowers which were a little stupid and ceremonious. Eleven o'clock had barely struck and he spent another half hour here and there, in his bank where he drew money, at a kiosk where he ran through the English magazines, at a tobacconist's who specialized in Oriental blends, at his perfumer's. Finally he stepped into his motor again, seated himself between his bouquet of flowers and his parcels tied with ribbons.

"Home."

The chauffeur turned around on his seat. "Monsieur? What did monsieur say?"

"I said to go home, Boulevard d'Inkermann. Do you need a map of Paris?"

The car shot for the Champs-Élysées. The chauffeur speeded zealously and his back, in which his thoughts could be read, seemed to curve uneasily over the gulf which separated the feckless young man of the months past, the young man with his, "As you choose," and "Have a glass, Antonin?" from young Monsieur Peloux, strict with his servants and watchful of the gasoline.

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Young Monsieur Peloux, leaning against morocco leather, his hat on his knees, drank in the spring wind and used all his concentration in an effort not to think. He closed his eyes like a coward between the Avenue Malakoff and the Porte Dauphine in order not to see passing the Avenue Bugeaud and congratulated himself: I have courage.

The chauffeur sounded his horn at the Boulevard d'Inkermann for the opening of the gate which sang on its hinges with a long note, solemn and harmonious. The concierge in his cap bowed, the watchdogs raised their voices to salute the familiar smell of someone they recognized. Perfectly at ease, sniffing the verdant odor of the clipped lawn, Chéri entered the house and mounted with a master's step toward the young woman whom he had left three months before as a European sailor on the other side of the world deserts his little savage bride.

Léa cast far from her, to the distant open desk, the photographs which she had taken from the last trunk. Good God, how ugly people are. How dared those women give these to me? Do they

think I'm going to put them on the mantelpiece in a nickel frame, perhaps, or in a little folding case? The waste basket's where they're going and in four pieces.

She took up the photographs again and before destroying them fixed them with the hardest expression of which her blue eyes were capable. Against the background of a postcard a fat woman without a waist draped her hair and the lower part of her cheeks with a veil which the wind lifted. "To my dear Léa in memory of the exquisite hours passed at Guéthary. Anita." In the centre of a square of pasteboard, rough as dried mud, another photograph displayed a large mournful family, a sort of penitentiary colony governed by a painted grandam on squat feet who waved a cotillion favor in one hand and posed one foot on the bended knee of a butcher-faced youth, sly and strong.

"Such things shouldn't be allowed," said Léa, crumpling the mud-like card.

An unmounted print which she unrolled spread before her an aged pair of provincial spinsters, eccentric, noisy, quarrelsome, who every morning used to be seated on a bench in the Mediterranean

promenade and every evening were to be found between a glass of blackberry cordial and their silk sewing frames on which they embroidered a black cat, a toad, a spider. "To our lovely sprite: from her little friends at Trayas, Miquette and Riquette."

Léa destroyed this souvenir of her recent voyage and lifted her hand to her forehead: It's horrible. And after these just as before these, others—others who look like the same thing. Nothing can be done about it. Life's like that. Perhaps everywhere there's a Léa there pops out of the earth some kind of Charlotte Peloux, de la Berche or Aldonza; all those old horrors who have been lovely when young—people, in other words, just people—impossible, impossible, impossible.

She heard as part of these recent souvenirs the voices which were always lifted in hail from the steps of the hotel, which called from afar "hoo-hoo" over the blond beach, and she dropped her head with a hostile bullish movement.

She had come back after six months a little thinner and mollified, less serene. Now a censorious and habitual gesture lowered her chin over her collar and casual barbers had lighted in her



tinted hair a too bright flame. But her amber skin, whipped by the sun and the sea, flowered like that of a beautiful farm wench and could still dispense with paint. However, it was necessary to drape prudently if not indeed entirely to hide her ruined throat, girdled with great wrinkles which the sunshine had not penetrated.

Seated, she halted in the midst of her small occupations and hunted about her as if for a lost piece of furniture, her old-time energy, her promptness in ordering her upholstered domain.

"Ah, that journey," she sighed. "What possessed me? How tiring it was."

She knitted her eyebrows and drew down her mouth in her new dissatisfied habit on noting that the glass was broken on a little portrait by Chaplin, a head of a young girl, pink and silver, which Léa found ravishing.

"And a rent as big as my two hands in the lace curtain. And that's only the beginning. . . . What was I thinking of to stay away for so long? And in honor of whom? . . . As if I couldn't have indulged my grief here in comfort."

She rose to ring, pulled about her the muslin of

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her tea-gown and apostrophized herself crudely: "Get along with you, you old sentimentalist."

Her maid entered, burdened with lingerie and silk stockings.

"Eleven o'clock, Rose. And my face hasn't been massaged. I'm late."

"Madame has nothing to hurry for. Madame hasn't those Demoiselles Mégret to drag madame off on picnics and to pick all her roses every morning. There's no longer Monsieur Roland to drive madame mad tossing pebbles against the window of her room."

"Rose, there's plenty to keep us busy here in this house. I don't know if moving the proverbial three times is as bad as one fire, but I do know that being away from home for six months is as bad as one deluge. Have you seen the lace curtain?"

"That's nothing. Madame hasn't seen the linen room yet. Mouse tracks everywhere and the carpet in holes. And just the same, it's queer that I left Emérancie twenty-eight dish cloths and I can find only twenty-two."

"No!"

"Just as I'm telling madame."

They looked at each other with equal indigna-

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tion, mutually attached to this comfortable house of silent carpets and silks, of full cupboards and shining basements. Léa slapped her knee with her strong hand.

"All that's going to change, my friend. If Ernest and Emérançie don't want to be given their eight days notice they'll find those six dish cloths. And that donkey of a Marcel, did you write him to come back?"

"He's already here, madame."

Dressing promptly, Léa opened the window and leaned out to contemplate complacently her avenue of renaissant trees. No more obsequious spinsters, no more Monsieur Roland, that heavy and athletic young man from Cambo.

"The idiot," she mused.

But she pardoned this passing creature his silliness, holding against him only the fact that he had failed to please. In her memory, that of a healthy woman with a forgetful body, Monsieur Roland was nothing more than a strong animal, a little ridiculous and at times unusually awkward. . . . Léa would have denied now that a blinding flood of tears—one certain rainy night when the torrent rolled, perfumed, among rose geraniums—had for





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an instant hidden Monsieur Roland behind the image of Chéri. . . .

The brief adventure had left Léa neither regret nor embarrassment. Afterwards as before the idiot and his foolish old mother would have continued to find in Léa's rented villa at Cambo the well-served teas, the rocking chairs on the balcony, the delicious comfort that Léa knew how to dispense and in which she took great pride. But the idiot, mortified, departed, leaving Léa to the mercies of a stiff and handsome officer, already turning grey, who aspired to marriage with Madame de Lonval.

"Our age, our fortune, our taste for independence and society, don't all these things point to our being destined for each other?" murmured the colonel who still kept his slim waist.

She laughed, she enjoyed the company of this rather dry man who ate well and drank without becoming drunk. He erred, read in the beautiful blue eyes and in the confident continued smile of his hostess the consent that she deferred giving. An unfortunate gesture marked the end of their dawning friendship which Léa regretted, honestly blaming herself before her own conscience.

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It was my fault. One shouldn't treat a Colonel Ypoustègue of a good old Basque family like a Monsieur Roland. I set him down a little too hard. Still he ought to have been a good sport and a man of spirit and come the next morning as usual in his dog cart to smoke his cigar and tease the two old maids.

She did not perceive that a man of mature years could accept his refusal but not certain glances which gauged him physically, which clearly compared him to another, to the unknown, to the invisible. . . .

Unexpectedly kissed, Lèa had not hidden that terrible and prolonged ocular investigation of a woman who knows where to look for the withering that age imposes on a man; from the hands, dry and manicured, ribbed with tendons and with veins, her eyes mounted to the sagging jaw, to the forehead barred with wrinkles; came back cruelly to the mouth, set in crow's feet like commas. And all the elegance of the so-called Baroness de Lonval exploded in a "Hoh, là, là!" so outrageous, so explicit, so common, that the handsome Colonel Ypoustègue retreated over her doorstep for the last time.

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My last loves, thought Léa, leaning out of her window. But the bright Parisian weather, the aspect of her clean and sonorous court with its clipped round laurels set in their green tubs, the scented warmth which escaped from her room and caressed her neck, little by little filled her again with malice and good humor. Women passed in silhouette, strolling toward the Bois.

"Skirts are changing again," Léa stated, "and hats are higher." She outlined a visit to her dress-maker, to Lewis; a sudden desire to be lovely seized her.

Lovely? For whom? For myself. And also to annoy the Mother Peloux.

Léa was not ignorant of Chéri's flight but the mere flight was all she knew. Severe with what she always called Charlotte's private detective system, still she permitted a young milliner whom she pampered to discharge her debt of gratitude by way of gossip poured into Léa's ears while the fitting was going on or received it with "a thousand thanks for those delicious chocolates," scrawled across a large sheet of paper embossed with the firm's letterhead. A postal card from the old Lili had reached Léa at Cambo, a postal card on which



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the ridiculous old harridan, without periods or punctuation and in a trembling script, recounted an incomprehensible story of love, of flight, of a young wife emprisoned at Neuilly.

It was fine weather just like today, Léa recalled, the morning at Cambo when I read the card from old Lili in my bath.

She recalled the yellow bathroom, the sunlight dancing on the water and on the ceiling. She heard again the echoes of that thin noisy villa throw back a great burst of laughter, rather ferocious and forced—her laughter—and then the cry that followed: “Rose. Rose.”

Shoulders and breasts out of water, dripping, robust, with her magnificent arm still stretched and resembling more than ever a figure from a fountain, she shook the moist card between the tips of her fingers. “Rose. Rose. Chéri—Monsieur Peloux has jumped the traces. He’s left his wife.”

“Madame doesn’t surprise me,” said Rose, “and the divorce will be happier than the marriage which looked like a first class funeral to me.”

All that day an importunate hilarity possessed Léa. Ah, my poisonous young lad. Oh, the wicked brat. Fancy.

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And she shook her head, laughing quietly to herself like a mother whose son has stayed out all night for the first time.

A varnished phaéton filed before her gate, shone and disappeared, almost noiseless on its rubber tires and the fine feet of its trotting pair.

"Well, well, there goes Spéleïeff," Léa declared. "A fine chap. And here comes Merguilier on his spotted horse. It must be eleven o'clock. Berthelley-le-Desséché will be next, en route to thaw his bones on the Sentier de la Vertu. It's curious how people can go on doing the same thing all their lives. I could believe that I had never left Paris if Chéri were here. My poor Chéri, it's all over with him for the present. Out all night, women, eating no matter when, drinking too much. . . . It's too bad. Who knows but what he might have made a fine man if he'd only had a red face like a butcher and flat feet."

She left the window, rubbing her numbed elbows, and shrugged her shoulders. One can rescue Chéri once but not twice. She polished her nails, breathed on a tarnished ring, inspected at close range the unsuccessful red of her hair and the

whitening roots and made some notes in her engagement book. She did everything quickly and with less composure than usual in order to fight off one of those subtle attacks of anxiety which she knew well and which she called—denying even the memory of her former pain—her moral indigestion. She wanted by fits and starts a well-swung victoria drawn by a regular dowager's cob, then a high-powered automobile, then directoire furniture for her salon. She even thought of changing the style of her coiffure which for twenty years she had worn high, revealing the nape of her neck. A little knot, low down, like Lavallière? That would allow me to cope with those loose-belted dresses they're wearing this year. In short with a strict diet and my henna decently done I can pretend to ten—no, let's say five years more of. . . .

An effort restored to her her common sense, filled her with lucid pride. A woman like me and not enough courage to know when to call a halt? Come, come, my fine friend, we've had our money's worth in our time. In her mirror she surveyed the tall Léa standing erect, her hands on her hips, smiling at herself.





## CHÉRI

A woman like that doesn't finish off in the arms of old men. A woman like that who's had the luck never to soil her hands or mouth on a wrinkled human being. Yes, there she is, the perfect vampire, if you wish, who only wants fresh flesh.

She recalled in her memories the passing faces and lovers of her youth which had been unpolluted by old men and to herself she seemed clean, proud, devoted for thirty years to radiant striplings or to fragile adolescents.

After all, the fresh flesh has been indebted to me. How many of them have me to thank for their good health, their beauty, their little worries which were never questionable, egg-nogs when they had colds and the habit of making love without selfishness or monotony. And I could dream now, merely in order not to have an empty bed, of some old gentleman in his—in his—

She cast about and decided with majestic unconsciousness: an old gentleman in his forties.

She pressed one of her beautifully made hands against the other in disgust, made a right-about face.

Pah. Goodbye to everything, that's cleaner.

Let's buy a pack of cards, good wine, bridge scores, knitting needles, all the paraphernalia needed as a stop-gap for life, everything needed to hide that horror—the old woman.

As a substitute for knitting needles she had numerous new gowns and a bed jacket that was like the clouds at dawn. The Chinese pedicurist came once a week, the manicurist twice and the masseuse every day. Léa was seen at the theatre and before the theatre in restaurants which she had never frequented in Chéri's time.

She permitted that young women and their friends, that Kühn, her former tailor and now retired, invite her to their loges or to their tables. But the young women treated her with a deference she did not require and Kühn called her "my dear friend," to which she responded at the beginning of their first feast; "Kühn, no question about it, being a client is not becoming to you."

She hunted out Patron again like one seeking a refuge, Patron, now umpire and promotor in some boxing scheme. But Patron was married to a young creature who ran a bar and was slight, terrible and jealous as a rat terrier. In order to

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find this sensible athlete, Léa had even risked going to the Place d'Italie, wrapped in her sapphire blue gown heavy with gold, her bird of paradise feathers, her imposing jewels and her hair the color of new mahogany. She had breathed the odors of sweat, of vinegar and turpentine, cast off by the "white hopes" Patron was training, and left, sure of never again setting foot in the enormous low hall where the gas whistled in green flames.

The effort she made to enter into the unsettled life of idle people cost her a weariness that she could not understand.

What's the matter with me?

She rubbed her ankles a little swollen by the time evening came, scanned her strong teeth below which the gums were only ever so slightly receding, tapped with her fist as if sounding a cask on her large-lying lungs, on her jovial stomach. Something indefinable in her, deprived of its absent support, was bending and carried her in its decline. The Baroness de la Berche, met in a cheap bar where she was washing down two dozen snails with a glass of wine fit for a cab driver, was the one who finally informed Léa of the return of the prodigal to the fold and of the rising of a new



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honeymoon in the Boulevard d'Inkermann's sky. Léa listened to this moral tale with indifference. But she turned pale with painful emotion the day after on recognizing the blue limousine before her gate and Charlotte Peloux who crossed the court.

"At last, at last. I've found you again, Léa, sweetheart. Handsomer than ever. Thinner than last year. Take care, dearie, don't risk getting too thin at our age. As you are now, but no more. And even at that. . . . However, what bliss to see you again."

Never had the grating voice sounded so sweet to Léa. She let Madame Peloux talk, grateful for this acid flow which gave her time to collect herself. She had seated Charlotte Peloux in a low armchair on small feet beneath the soft light of the little salon with the painted silk walls, as in other days. She herself mechanically took the stiff backed chair which compelled her to throw back her shoulders and lift her chin, as in other days. Between them the table spread with wrinkled old embroidery supported, as in other days the tall cut crystal carafe half full of aged brandy, the quivering chalice-shaped glasses, thin as a sheet of mica, cold water and dry biscuits.





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"Well, sweetheart, now we're going to be able to see each other again freely, freely," sniveled Charlotte. "You know my motto—cut your friends dead when you're in trouble; only make them part of the happy moments of your life. All the while that Chéri was playing truant and I didn't give you any sign of life, it was on purpose, you understand? But now that my two children are happy once more, and I'm telling it to you, I throw myself in your arms and we start our good old life again," . . . she interrupted herself, lit a cigarette, as clever in creating suspense as an actress, "without Chéri, naturally."

"Without Chéri, naturally," acquiesced Léa, smiling.

She watched and listened to her old enemy with dumbfounded satisfaction. Those large inhuman eyes, that garrulous mouth, that short body, obese and restless—everything facing her had come only to put her strength to a test, to humiliate her as in other days, always as in other days. But as in other days, Léa knew how to respond, to despise, to smile, to assemble her forces. Already the sad weight which had been oppressing her yesterday and the days before seemed to have melted. A light

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which was normal and customary bathed the salon and played among the curtains.

Here we all are, thought Léa briskly. Two women a little older than last year, habitual malice and stock phrases, mild battles and our meals together; the financial page in the mornings, scandalmongering in the afternoons—all that must be taken up because it's life, because it's my life. The Aldonzas and the de la Berches, the Lilis and a few old gentlemen without homes, all that lot squeezed around a gaming table where the brandy glasses and the cards will lie side by side maybe with a pair of little socks begun for a baby who'll soon be born. . . . Let's start it all again since it's in the order of things. And let's do it in good style since anyhow I fall into it as easily as slipping into a pair of old shoes.

And she settled herself, eyes clear and mouth parted, to listen to Charlotte Peloux who talked avidly about her daughter-in-law.

"You ought to know, Léa dear, if the ambition of my life hasn't always been peace and quiet? Well, I have it at last. Chéri's flight after all was just like breaking out in a rash. Far be it from me, my dear, to reproach you, but admit that from

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his nineteenth to his twenty-fifth year he really didn't have a chance to lead the life of a young bachelor. Well, he's led it now for three months, he has sowed his wild oats once and for all. And a good thing it was."

"It's better than that," said Léa without losing her gravity. "It's a pledge he gives to his young wife."

"Just it, just the word I was hunting for," squealed Madame Peloux radiantly. "A pledge for their future. And ever since that day their life has been a dream. For you know when a Peloux once comes home after having really painted the town red, he doesn't go out again."

"Ah, a family tradition, I suppose?" demanded Léa.

But Charlotte was in no mood to listen. "Furthermore, he was well received when he came home. His little wife—ah, there's one worth having, I'll say. You know if I haven't seen a few little wives in my day—well, I never saw one who could even hold a candle to Edmée."

"Her mother is so remarkable," said Léa.

"Think, only think, sweetheart, Chéri left her on my hands for almost three months and between

us I don't mind stating she was lucky that I was there."

"That's exactly what I was saying to myself," said Léa.

"Well, my dear, not one complaint; not a scene, not one stupid thing did she do, nothing, nothing. Patience itself, she was, and sweetness, with the face of a saint, a saint."

"It's terrifying," said Léa.

"And do you think when our young rascalion walked in one morning, serene as if he'd just finished a stroll in the Bois, do you think she allowed herself to comment? Nothing. She didn't say that much. Also he, who in his heart ought to have felt a little ashamed—"

"Oh, why?" said Léa.

"Oh, really now, after all—As I was saying, he found a perfect reception and they made their peace in their bedroom, bang! just like that and without losing any time. Ah, I assure you, during that hour there wasn't a happier woman in the world than me."

"Except Edmée, perhaps," suggested Léa.

But Madame Peloux had an ear only for the soul and made a superb soaring movement with her

fin. "I don't know what you're thinking of. Personally I thought of nothing but the home that was once more united."

She changed her tone, curled her eye and her lip. "In any case I don't see that little girl in any delirium or crying out loud with ecstasy. Twenty years old and skinny. . . . Pah. At that age they yawn. And anyhow, between us, I think her mother's cold."

"Your theories of family solidarity lead you astray," said Léa.

Charlotte Peloux candidly displayed the depth of her enormous eyes in which nothing could be read.

"Oh, no—oh, no. Heredity. Heredity. I'm a firm believer in it. Therefore my son who is fantasy itself. . . . What? You didn't know he was fantasy itself?"

"It must have slipped my mind," Léa apologized.

"Well, as I started to say, I have high hopes for my son's future. He is going to love his home as I loved mine, he'll look after his fortune, he'll love his children as I loved him."

"Don't prophecy so many sad things at once,"



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Léa begged. "What's it like, the home of the young people?"

"Sinister," cackled Madame Peloux. "Positively sinister. Violet carpets. Violet, mind you. A black and gold bathroom. A salon without any furniture in it and full of Chinese vases as big as I am. The result is they're always at Neuilly. Anyhow, without being conceited, the little wife adores me."

"Hasn't she ever had some strong nervous disorders?" demanded Léa with solicitude.

Charlotte Peloux's eye brightened. "She? No danger of that, we're up against a will of iron there."

"We? Who's we?"

"Pardon, sweetheart, habit, just habit. We are up against what I call a brain, a real brain. She has such a way of giving orders without raising her voice, of accepting Chéri's sallies, of swallowing poison as if it were condensed milk. . . . I ask myself sometimes, I really wonder if some day there mightn't be a danger in her for Chéri. I'm afraid, I'm really afraid that she'll put a damper on his originality, his—"

"What? He's toned down?" interrupted Léa.

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"Take some more of my brandy, Charlotte, it was Spéleïeff's, it's seventy-four years old and could be given to a new-born babe."

"Toned down's not the word exactly, but he's—inter—imperturb—er—"

"Imperturbable?"

"You said it. For instance when he knew I was coming to see you—"

"What? He knew it?"

The blood impetuously bounded to Léa's cheek and she damned her hot emotions and the bright daylight of the little salon.

Madame Peloux's with a suave eye fattened on Léa's distress. "But of course he knew it. No point in blushing about that, sweetheart. Aren't you a baby."

"In the first place how did you know I had come back?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Léa, don't ask questions like that. Everybody saw you everywhere."

"Yes, but Chéri—you told him I was back?"

"No, sweetheart, he was the one who told me."

"Oh, it was he who— Curious." She heard her heart beating in her voice and dared not risk long sentences.

## CHÉRI

"He even added, 'Madame Peloux, you'll please me by going to get news of Nounoune.' He's still so fond of you, the dear boy."

"How nice of him."

Madame Peloux, red in the face, seemed to abandon herself to the influences of the brandy bottle and talked as in a dream, nodding her head. But her russet eyes remained firm, steely, and kept watch on Léa who sat stiffly, armed against herself and waiting for she did not know what blow.

"It's nice but it's natural. A man doesn't forget a woman like you, Léa mine. And do you want to know what I really think? You've only to make a sign and—"

Léa put her hand on the arm of Charlotte Peloux. "I don't want to know what you really think," she said kindly.

Madame Peloux let the corners of her mouth fall. "Oh, I understand you, I approve," she sighed in a wan voice. "When one's made other arrangements in one's life like you have— Of course I haven't said a word to you about yourself yet."

"But it seems to me you have."

"Happy?"

"Happy."

"A great love, eh? Marvelous voyage? Is he sweet? Where's his photograph?"

Léa, relieved, shook her head and sharpened her smile. "No, no, you'll not find out a thing. Hunt. Has your private detective system broken down, Charlotte?"

"I don't rely on any private detective system," replied Charlotte. "It wasn't because this one or that one told me that . . . that you'd been deserted again . . . that you'd had awful money troubles. . . . No, no, not I, you know how little attention I pay to twaddle like that."

"No one knows it better than I. My Lolotte, you can leave here without a worry on my behalf. Tell your friends the same. And I only hope they made half the killing I made on Oil Preferred between December and February."

The alcoholic cloud which had softened the features of Madame Peloux lifted. She showed a face, clear, dry, aroused. "You were on oil? I might have known it. And you didn't tell me."

"You didn't ask. Your mind was on your family only, quite naturally."

"Fortunately my mind was also on Pressed

CHÉRI

Bricks Common at the same time," the stifled trumpet fluted.

"Ah? And you didn't tell me either."

"Intrude on love's young dream? Not likely. Léa mine, I'm going now, but I'll come back."

"You'll come on Thursday because at present, Lolotte, dear, your Sundays at Neuilly . . . they're finished for me. Would you like it if we had little Thursdays here? No one except old friends. Mother Aldonza, our Right Reverend Father, the Baroness—your poker, my knitting—Well?"

"You knit?"

"Not yet, but it will come soon. Well?"

"I skip with joy at the thought. Look if I'm not skipping with joy. And you know I won't say a word about it at the house. The boy would be capable of coming here and asking for a glass of porto on Thursday. Just one more little kiss, sweetheart. God, how good you smell. Have you noticed that as the skin gets less firm, perfume lasts better? It's such a pleasure. . . ."

Hurry, hurry . . . Trembling, Léa's glance followed Madame Peloux as she crossed the court. Hurry on your evil way. Nothing will stop you.

You turned your ankle? Yes, but you won't fall down. Your chauffeur is careful and doesn't skid, so he won't wreck you on a tree. You'll arrive safe enough at Neuilly and you'll choose your moment—today, tomorrow, next week—to say all the things you never should say. You'll try to upset those who perhaps are at peace. The least you'll do is to make them tremble momentarily like me.

Her limbs quivered like those of a horse that has climbed a hill but she did not suffer. The guard she had maintained over herself and over her replies rejoiced her. A pleased vivacity illumined her skin and her eyes and she kneaded her handkerchief into a ball because she still had force to expend. She was unable to take her thoughts off Charlotte Peloux.

We've found each other again, she thought. Like two dogs finding the slipper they're in the habit of chewing. How curious. That woman is my enemy and it's from her my comfort comes. How bound together we are, she and I.

She dreamed for a long time, by fits and starts fearful and then accepting her fate. The relaxation of her nerves afforded her a brief sleep. Seated and with her cheek on her hand in dream she

## CHÉRI

penetrated into her immediate old age, imaged her days one after the other and all the same; saw herself across from Charlotte Peloux, and prevented by a lively rivalry which shortened the hours from sinking into the ripe woman's degrading indifference first to her corsets, then to the tinting of her hair and finally to fine underclothes. She tasted in advance the shameful pleasures of the senile which are nothing but secret struggles, murderous wishes and hot hopes constantly refreshed in imagined catastrophes which spare but one human being, but one spot on earth—and woke astonished in twilight pink and comparable to the dawn.

"Ah, Chéri," she sighed.

But it was no longer the raucous hungry outcry of the year past nor the tears nor the revolt of the whole body which suffers and mutinies against the inorganic grief that tries to destroy it. . . . Léa rose, rubbed her cheek, tooled by the cushion's embroidery.

My poor Chéri. . . . It's curious to think that in losing you your old mistress, I my scandalous young lover—we both lost the most honorable thing we had on earth.

Two days passed after the visit of Charlotte. Two grey days which were long to Léa and which she patiently endured with the soul of an apprentice. "Since we are going to have to live like this, let's start," she stated. But she applied herself with awkwardness and an exaggerated industry that augured ill for her novitiate. The second day she wanted to go out, to walk as far as the Lakes just before noon.

I'll buy a dog, she decided. He'll keep me company and force me to walk. And Rose had to hunt in the bottom of the cedar closet for a pair of yellow boots with thick soles and a rough-looking suit which smelled of the Alps and the forest. Léa started out with that swing which certain types of shoes and wool clothing impose upon their wearer.

Ten years ago I would have risked carrying a cane, she thought. Still close to her house she heard behind her a rapid light step which she thought she recognized. A stupefying fear which she had no time to combat enervated her and despite herself she was overtaken, then outdistanced by an unknown hurried young man who did not glance at her.



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Relieved, she breathed; "I'm too absurd."

She bought a dark carnation for her button-hole and started off again. But before her, thirty paces away, firmly planted in the diaphanous fog which covered the lawns and the avenue, a masculine silhouette awaited her.

This time I know I recognize that cut of the waistcoat and the fashion of swinging the stick. No, thanks, I don't want him to see me wearing shoes like a postman's and a thick jacket that makes me look fat. If I must meet him, I'd rather he saw me in something other than this, since he never could stand brown anyhow. No, no, I'm going home, I'm . . .

At this moment the man who was waiting hailed an empty taxi, stepped in and passed in front of Léa; he was a blond young man with a small moustache. But Léa did not smile and no longer felt at ease. She turned on her heel and went home.

"One of my bad days, Rose. Tired. Give me my peachblow tea gown, the new one, and the big robe, the embroidered one without sleeves. I'm smothering in all this wool."

There's no point in forcing my luck, thought Léa.

## CHÉRI

Two times in succession it wasn't Chéri; the third time it would have been. I know these little tricks of fate. There's nothing to be done against them and today I have no fight in me. I'm weak.

She occupied herself all day with her patient efforts at solitude. Cigarettes and her newspapers amused her after luncheon and she welcomed with brief joy a telephone call from the Baroness de la Berche, then one from Spéleïeff, her former lover, the handsome horse-dealer who had seen her the night before and who wanted to sell her a fine pair.

Then there followed a long hour of total silence which was frightening. Her arms bare, her hands on her hips, she walked up and down, followed by a magnificent train of her heavy robe broided in gold and roses.

Come, come, let's try to see the facts as they are. The moment that the boy no longer cares anything about me is not the time for me to become demoralized. I've lived alone now for six months. In the Midi I managed very well. For one thing, I went from place to place. And those creatures in the Riviera and the Pyrénées did me good, each time one of them went away forever I felt quite revived. . . . Poultices on a burn won't cure but

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they relieve on condition that one changes them all the time. My six months of changing are the life story of that horrible Sarah Cohen who married the ugliest man on earth. "Each time I look at him," she said, "I think I'm pretty."

But before those last six months; I knew what it was to live alone. How did I live after I left Spéleïeff, for instance? Oh, yes, I did all the bars and night places with Patron and right after that I had Chéri. But before Spéleïeff, the little Lequellec whose family dragged him away so they could marry him off, poor lad, with his beautiful eyes full of tears. . . . After him I was alone four months, I remember. The first month I cried a lot. No, it was for Bacciocchi that I cried so much. But when I finished crying no one could hold me I was so delighted to find myself alone. Yes, but during the Bacciocchi period I was twenty-eight years old and after Lequellec I was thirty and between them I had known. . . . Well, it doesn't much matter. . . . After Spéleïeff I was disgusted with so much money badly spent. Whereas after Chéri, I'm . . . I'm fifty years old and I committed the imprudence of holding him for seven years.

## CHÉRI

She wrinkled her forehead, made herself ugly in a bad-humored grimace.

It serves me right. At my age one doesn't keep a lover for seven years. Seven years. He ruined what was left of me. In those seven years I might have had two or three little happinesses quite comfortably instead of one enormous regret. . . . A liason of seven years is like following a husband out to the colonies; when you come back no one recognizes you and you've forgotten how to wear your clothes properly.

To strengthen her resistance she rang for Rose and they rearranged Léa's laces in the small armoire devoted to their care. Night settled down, hatching the lights beneath it. Rose was called below to her other duties in the house.

"Tomorrow," Léa said, "I'll take the car and motor to the Norman stud farm of Spéleïeff. I'll take old La Berche if she wishes—it will recall to her mind the carriages of her former glory. And my word, if the younger Spéleïeff casts his eye my way, I don't say that I wouldn't . . ."

She took the trouble to smile with a tempting mysterious air in order to deceive whatever phantoms might be strolling around her dressing table

and her formidable bed which scintillated in the shadow. But she felt cold all over and contemptuous of the voluptuous pleasures of others.

Her dinner of fine fish and pastries provided a recreation. She replaced Bordeaux with dry champagne and hummed on leaving the table. Eleven o'clock surprised her as she was measuring with a cane the width of the panels between the windows of her room where she considered replacing all the big mirrors with old canvases painted with flowers and balustrades. She yawned, scratched her head and rang to be made ready for the night. While Rose removed her long silk stockings, Léa considered the conquered day already shed into the past, which gratified her like a penance performed. Sheltered for the night from the danger of idleness, she discounted the hours of sleep against those of wakefulness, since restlessness recovers along with night the privilege of yawning out loud, of sighing, of cursing the sound of the milk carts, the street sweepers and the first sparrows.

During her preparations for the night she turned over in her mind mild projects which she would never realize.

Aline Mesmacker has taken a restaurant-bar

## CHÉRI

which has turned into a perfect gold mine. Obviously it's something to do as well as an investment. . . . But I can't see myself behind a cashier's desk and if one hires a manager it's not worth while. Dora and that fat Fifi are running a night club together, old La Berche told me. Everyone's doing it. And they wear boiled shirts and smoking jackets to attract a special clientèle. Fat Fifi has three children to bring up—well, they're her excuse. . . . Then there's Kühn who's bored and would be delighted to take some of my capital to open a new tailoring business.

Naked and tinted bright pink by the reflections in her Pompeian bathroom, she scented herself with her sandalwood and with unconscious pleasure unfolded a long nightgown of silk.

All those are idle words. I know perfectly well that I don't like to work. To bed, madame. You'll never have any other place of business and all the clients are fled.

She wrapped herself in a white gandourah whose colored lining lent it an indefinite pink light and returned to her dressing table. Her two lifted arms combed and clasped her hair, hardened by dye, and framed her tired face. They remained so magnifi-

cent, these arms, full and muscled from the arm-pit down to the rounded elbow, that she contemplated them a long moment.

What lovely handles for such an old urn.

With negligent fingers she planted a pale comb at the nape of her neck and without much hope chose a detective story from the shelf of a dark closet. She had no taste for fine bindings and could not break herself of her habit of relegating books to the bottom of closets in company with empty boxes and bottles from the pharmacy.

As she stood bent over her big open bed, stroking the fine cold linen, the deep bell of the court vibrated. The solemn, round, unwonted sound shocked the midnight hour.

"What on earth—?" she said aloud.

She listened, lips apart, holding her breath. A second peal was even louder than the first and Léa in a gesture of self-preservation and modesty ran to powder her face. She was going to ring for Rose when she heard the front door slam, the noise of steps in the vestibule and staircase, two voices mingled, her maid's and someone's else. She had no time to make a decision, the door opened under a brutal hand; Chéri was before her, his

## CHÉRI

coat wide over his evening clothes, his hat still on his head, pale and menacing.

He leaned against the closed door and did not move. He looked not so much at Léa as at the entire room, in an errant fashion, like a man about to be attacked.

Léa who had that morning trembled before a silhouette guessed at in the fog, so far felt nothing more than the displeasure of a woman surprised in her undressing. She closed her tea gown, settled her comb, hunted with one foot for her fallen slipper. She blushed but when the blood left her cheeks she had already gained the appearance of calm. She lifted her head and seemed taller than the young man leaning in black against the white door.

"That's a nice way to enter," she said rather loudly. "You might at least take off your hat and say good evening."

"Good evening," said Chéri in a haughty voice.

Its sound seemed to astonish him; he looked about him more humanly. A sort of smile descended from his eyes to his mouth and he repeated gently: "Good evening." He removed his hat and took two or three steps. "May I sit down?"



"If you wish," said Léa.

He sat down on an ottoman and saw that she remained standing. "Are you dressing? Aren't you going out?"

She made a sign of denial, seated herself far from him, took up her nail buffer and said nothing. He lit a cigarette and asked permission to smoke after it was lighted.

"If you wish," said Léa indifferently.

He said nothing more and lowered his eyes. The hand holding his cigarette trembled slightly which he noted and braced it against the edge of the table. Léa applied herself to her nails with slow movements and from time to time passed a brief glance over Chéri's face, above all over his lowered lids and the sombre fringe of his lashes.

"It's Ernest as usual who opened the door for me," said Chéri at last.

"Why shouldn't it be Ernest? Should I change my staff of servants just because you are married?"

"No. . . . I mean, I simply remarked that . . ."

Silence fell again. Léa broke it. "May I ask if you have the intention of staying much longer? I haven't even asked you yet why you permit yourself to come to my house at midnight—"

## CHÉRI

"You may ask me," he said quickly.

She shook her head. "It doesn't interest me."

He lifted himself forcibly, spinning the ottoman behind him, and walked toward Léa. She felt him bend over her as if he were going to strike her but she did not draw back. She thought: What should I be afraid of in this world?

"You don't know why I've come back here? You don't want to know why I've come back?"

He tore off his coat, threw it wing-like toward the chaise longue, crossed his arms and cried close to Léa's face in a tone of stifled triumph: "I've come home."

She was manipulating a delicate manicure instrument which she closed unhurriedly before drying her fingers. Chéri fell back on a chair as if he had no more strength.

"Good," said Léa. "You've come back. That's very pretty. Whom did you consult about that?"

"Myself," said Chéri.

She lifted herself now in her turn the better to dominate. The beating of her calmed heart allowed her to breathe freely and she wished to play her scene without a fault.

"Why didn't you ask my advice? I'm an old

## CHÉRI

friend who knows all about such tricks. How did you happen not to think that in coming here you might not embarrass—someone?”

With bent head he inspected the room horizontally; its closed doors, the bed girded in metal and its embankment of precious pillows. He saw nothing unwonted, nothing new, and shrugged his shoulders.

Léa expected more than that and insisted: “You understand what I mean to say?”

“Perfectly,” he answered. “The gentleman of the house hasn’t come in yet? The gentleman is passing the night somewhere else?”

“Those things are none of your business, my dear,” she said tranquilly.

He bit his lip and nervously shook the ash from his cigarette into an old-fashioned carved jewel cup.

“Not in there, I always tell you that,” cried Léa. “How many times must I—”

She broke off, reproaching herself for having taken on without noticing the voice of their familiar quarrels. But he seemed not to have heard, examining a ring, an emerald bought by Léa on her voyage.

## CHÉRI

"What's . . . what's this?" he stammered.

"That? It's an emerald."

"I'm not blind. I mean to say, who gave it to you?"

"No one you know."

"Charming," said Chéri bitterly.

His accent returned to Léa all her authority and she gave herself the pleasure of pushing her advantage farther.

"Isn't it charming? Everywhere I go I'm complimented on it. And the setting. Did you notice the filigree of diamonds which—"

"Enough!" bawled Chéri with rage, striking his fist on the fragile table.

Some roses shed their leaves at the impact, a porcelain cup slipped without breaking to the thick carpet. Léa stretched toward the telephone a hand which Chéri stopped with a rough arm.

"What are you going to do with that telephone?"

"Call the police," said Léa.

He took her two arms, feigned boyishness in pushing her far from the transmitter. "Oh, listen, don't be silly. One can't say a word without your becoming melodramatic."

She sat down and turned her back on him. He

## CHÉRI

remained standing, his hands empty; his mouth, open and swollen, was that of a sulky child. One black lock hung down over his eyebrow. In a mirror Léa spied on him clandestinely but he seated himself and his face disappeared from the glass. In turn Léa, embarrassed, felt that he was looking at her back, enlarged by the fullness of her robe. She returned to her dressing table, stroked her hair, replanted her comb and, as if for want of something better to do, opened a vial of her perfume. Chéri turned his head toward this odor.

"Nounoune," he called.

She did not answer.

"Nounoune."

"Beg my pardon," she said without turning.

"Not jolly likely."

"I'll not force you. But you'll have to leave. And at once."

"Pardon," he said promptly and in a snarling voice.

"Better than that."

"Pardon," he repeated in a low voice.

"Good." She came to him and passed her hand over his bent head. "Now tell us all about it."

He trembled and shook under the caress. "What

## CHÉRI

do you want me to tell you? It's not complicated. I've come home here, that's all."

"Talk, go on, talk to me."

He balanced on the edge of her chair, pressing his hands between his knees, and lifted his head toward Léa but without looking at her. She saw his white nostrils flare, she heard his rapid breath which he sought to discipline. She only had to say once more; "Go on; talk," and push him with her finger as if to make him fall over.

"Nounoune, darling," he called. "Nounoune, darling," and threw himself against her with all his force, embracing her long limbs which suddenly bent.

Forced to her chair, she let him slip to the floor and roll against her with tears, with incoherent words, with groping fingers which caught at her laces, at her necklace, seeking beneath her robe the form of her shoulder and the place for his ear beneath her hair.

"Nounoune, darling, I've found you again, my Nounoune, oh, my Nounoune, your shoulder and your perfume and your necklace, my Nounoune. Oh, it's wonderful. . . . And that little burnt taste always in your hair—ah, it's wonderful."

## CHÉRI

Fallen back, he exhaled the childish word like the last breath from his lungs. From his knees he clasped Léa in his arms and offered her his forehead shadowed with hair, his trembling wet mouth and his eyes where joy poured out in luminous tears. She observed him so deeply, with so perfect a forgetfulness of all that was not himself that she did not think to kiss him. She tied her arms around Chéri's throat and pressed him to her in a tender synchrony with the rhythm of murmured words: "My dearest, my bad little thing. . . . You're here. . . . You've come back again. . . . What is it you've done now? You're so naughty. . . . My beauty."

Behind closed lips he commiserated with himself softly and hardly spoke. He listened to Léa and placed his cheek on her breast. He begged "Again" when she suspended her tender litany and Léa, who feared crying with him, scolded him with the same voice.

"Wicked little beast. . . . Heartless little devil. . . . My good-for-nothing."

He gave her a look of gratitude. "Yes, yes. Abuse me, Nounoune."







## CHÉRI

She held him at arm's length the better to enjoy him. "You love me then?"

He lowered his eyes in childish confusion. "Yes, Nounoune."

A little outburst of strangled laughter which she could not imprison warned Léa that she was close to giving herself over to the most terrible joy of her life. An embrace, the collapse, the open bed, two bodies joining like the two living halves of an animal which had just been sundered. No, no, she thought. Not yet, not yet.

"I'm thirsty," sighed Chéri. "Nounoune, I'm thirsty."

She rose in haste, felt of the tepid carafe and disappeared to return in the same breath. Chéri, rolled in a ball on the floor, was resting his head on the couch.

"Rose will fetch you some lemonade," said Léa. "Don't stay there. Sit on the chaise longue. Does the lamp annoy you?"

She trembled with joy at serving and giving orders. She seated herself on the divan and Chéri half reclined against her.

"Perhaps you'll tell me a little now about—"

The entry of Rose interrupted her. Without ris-

ing Chéri turned his head languidly toward Rose.  
“Evening, Rose.”

“Good evening, monsieur,” said Rose discreetly.

“Rose, tomorrow at nine I want—”

“Brioche and chocolate,” Rose finished for him.

Chéri closed his eyes with a sigh of well-being.  
“How right you are. . . . Rose, where am I going to dress in the morning?”

“In the boudoir,” said Rose complacently. “Only I’d better take the couch out and shouldn’t I bring in the dressing table as it used to be?”

She looked for consultation toward Léa, proudly in evidence and holding up her spoiled charge while he drank.

“If you wish, Rose,” said Léa. “We’ll see. That’ll be all now.”

Rose retired and during the moment of silence which followed nothing could be heard except the uncertain sound of the wind and the cry of a bird that mistook the moon for dawn.

“Chéri, are you asleep?”

He drew one of his long hunting-dog sighs. “No, no, Nounoune. I’m too happy to sleep.”

“Tell me, darling. . . . You didn’t make trouble for anyone—over there—did you?”

## CHÉRI

"At home? No, Nounoune. Not at all, I assure you."

"Was there a scene?"

He looked up at her without lifting his trusting head. "Honestly. I left because I left, that's all. The child's very nice, there was no trouble."

"Ah."

"However, I wouldn't take my oath that she had no suspicions. This evening she had what I always call her orphan expression; you know, sad eyes beneath her lovely hair . . . you know what pretty hair she has?"

"Yes." She offered monosyllables only in a low voice as if she answered one who talked in his sleep.

"I suspect," continued Chéri, "that she must have seen me cross the garden."

"Ah?"

"Yes. She was on the balcony in a white beaded dress, a sort of frozen white—oh, I don't like that frock . . . that dress had made me want to cut and run ever since dinner."

"Yes?"

"Yes, it had, Nounoune. Still I'm not really sure

## CHÉRI

she saw me. The moon wasn't up. It rose while I was waiting."

"Where were you waiting?"

Chéri vaguely waved his hand toward the avenue. "There. I was waiting; you understand. I wanted to see. I waited a long time."

"But what for?"

He moved away from her brusquely, sat down on another chair. He resumed his expression of savage suspicion. "I wanted to be sure there was nobody here."

"Ah, yes, you thought that . . ." She could not resist a laugh of contempt. A lover in her house? A lover as long as Chéri was alive? It was grotesque. How stupid he is, she thought with enthusiasm.

"You're laughing?"

He stood up before her, put his hand on her forehead and pushed back her hair. "You can laugh? You're making fun of me. You've . . . you have a lover—you? You have someone?"

He bent over her as he spoke, forcing her neck against the chaise longue. She felt on her eyelids the breath from his malevolent mouth and made on effort to free herself from the hand that strained at her forehead and hair.

## CHÉRI

"Dare to say it, that you have a lover."

Her eyelids wavered, she was dazed by the bursting visage which bore down on her and she said finally in a toneless voice: "No, I have no lover. I love you."

He released her and began pulling off his dinner jacket, his waistcoat; his cravat whistled through the air and settled around the throat of the bust of Léa on the mantelpiece. He did not move away from her, however, and still kept her, knee to knee, seated on the chaise longue. When she saw him half naked, she asked him almost sadly: "Ah, why, Chéri. . . . Yes?"

He did not answer, absorbed by the idea of his approaching pleasure and his eagerness to possess her again. She submitted and served her young lover as a good mistress, attentive and grave. Only with a sort of terror she saw approaching the moment of her own defeat; she endured Chéri like a form of torture, pushed him with her weak hands, but kept him between her powerful knees. Finally she seized him by the arm, cried out feebly and sank into that abyss from which love remounts pale, taciturn and full of regret for its death.

They did not leave each other's embrace and no word troubled the long silence in which they came

## CHÉRI

back to life. Chéri's body had slipped against Léa's side and with eyes closed he lay with his head hanging on the sheet as if he had been stabbed upon his mistress. She, turned from him a little, bore almost all his weight which spared her nothing. She panted quietly, her left arm, crushed, hurt her and Chéri felt his neck growing numb, but both waited in respectful immobility until the decreasing bolt of pleasure should pass farther away from them.

He's sleeping, thought Léa. Her free hand still held Chéri's wrist which she pressed softly. A knee whose beautiful curve she knew well, was bruising her knee. At the height of her own heart she felt the equal stifled beating of another heart. Tenacious, violent, a mixture of oily flowers and exotic woods, Chéri's perfume wandered through the room. He is here, she thought. Leaving his house, his silly little, pretty little wife, he has come back, he's come back to me. Who could take him away? Now, now I can organize our lives. . . . He doesn't always know what he wants, but me, I know. Doubtless we'll have to go away. We won't hide but we'll need quiet. . . . And then I have to have time to look at him. I couldn't have

## CHÉRI

looked at him enough all the years I didn't know I loved him. I'll have to find some spot where there'll be enough room for his caprices and my will. . . . I'll think for both of us. . . . Let him do the sleeping.

As with precaution she withdrew her left arm, prickling and painful, and her shoulder which immobility had paralyzed, she glanced at Chéri's tilted face and saw that he was not asleep. The white of his eyes was gleaming and the short black wing of his long lashes beat irregularly.

"What? Aren't you asleep?"

She felt him tremble against her and he turned over in one complete movement. "But you're not asleep either, Nounoune." He stretched his hand toward the night table and touched the lamp; a curtain of pink light covered the bed, heightened the pattern of the lace, dug dark hollows between the padded hills of the down quilt. Chéri, extended at full length, saluted this scene of his peace and of his passionate pleasures. Léa, leaning on her elbow at her side, caressed the long lashes which she loved and lifted Chéri's hair from his forehead. Lying thus and with his hair scattered



## CHÉRI

over his temples, he looked as if he had been blown down by some furious wind.

The enamel clock struck. Chéri brusquely sat up in bed. "What time is it?"

"I don't know; what difference can it make to us?"

"Oh, I just asked. . . ."

He laughed briefly and did not lie down at once. The bottles of the first milk-cart rang out their noisy chimes and he made a slight movement in the direction of the avenue. Between the strawberry-colored curtains the cold blade of dawning day insinuated itself. Chéri brought his glance back to Léa and contemplated her with that force and fixity which make the attention of a perplexed child or an incredulous dog so formidable. An unreadable thought rose in the depths of his eyes whose form, whose gilliflower color, whose alternating severe or sad brilliance only aided him in conquering rather than in revealing his mind. His nude torso, large through the shoulders, slim about the waist, emerged from the mussed sheets as from foam and all his being breathed forth the melancholy of perfect things.

"Ah, Chéri . . ." breathed Léa drunkenly.

He did not smile, accustomed to receiving praise simply. "Tell me, Nounoune. . . ."

"What, my beauty?"

He hesitated, winked his eyes, trembled. "I'm tired. . . . And tomorrow, how will you manage about . . ."

With tender force Léa thrust the naked arms, the heavy head back among the pillows. "Don't worry about all that. Lie down. Isn't Nounoune here? Don't think of anything. Sleep. You're cold, I wager. . . . Here, take this, it's warm."

She rolled him in the silk and wool of some small feminine garment plucked from the bed and extinguished the light. In the shadow she lent him her shoulder, bent herself about him happily, listened to the breathing which echoed her own. No desire tormented her but still she did not hope for sleep. Let him sleep, it's for me to think, she repeated to herself. I'll manage so that our departure will be painless, discreet; what I wish is to cause the least amount of scandal and suffering. . . . It'll be the Midi again which would please us most, it being spring. If I consulted only myself, I'd rather stay here, peacefully. But the old Madame Peloux and the young Madame Peloux. . . .

The image of a young woman in a nightgown, anxious and standing by a window, checked Léa only long enough for her to shrug her shoulders with cold impartiality. I can do nothing about that. What makes one person's happiness. . . .

The black silk head moved on her breast and the sleeping lover moaned in a dream. With a savage arm, Léa protected him from his nightmare and rocked him so that he finally rested—without eyes, without memory, without plans,—resembling some spoiled child she had never given birth to in her youth.

Awake for some time, he refrained from moving. Cheek on folded arm, he tried to guess the hour. A pure sky must have been shedding its precocious heat on the avenue since no shadow of a cloud mitigated the ardent pink of the curtains. Ten o'clock, perhaps? Hunger gnawed him, he had eaten little the night before. A year ago he would have bounded out of bed, disturbed Léa's rest and furiously called at the top of his lungs for creamy chocolate and iced butter. . . . He did not move. He feared by moving to crumble the last of his joy, the ocular pleasure he tasted in the ember-

pink of the curtains, the steel and copper spirals of the bed shimmering in the colored light of the room. His great happiness of the night before seemed to have taken refuge, melted and small, in the reflection of a rainbow that flickered on the side of a crystal cup.

The circumspect footsteps of Rose grazed the carpet of the landing. A discreet broom was sweeping the court. Chéri heard a distant tinkling of china in the butler's pantry. . . . How long this morning is, he thought. I'll get up. But he remained motionless because behind him, Léa yawned, stretched her legs. A soft hand touched his back but he closed his eyes and all his body enacted a falsehood by feigning the softness of sleep. He sensed that Léa left the bed and he saw her pass in black silhouette before the curtain which she half opened. She turned toward him, glanced and shook her head with a smile which was not victorious but resolute and equal to all dangers. She was in no haste to leave the room and Chéri, opening his eyes by a hair's-breadth of light, spied on her. He saw that she opened a time table and moved her finger down its column of figures. Then she seemed to calculate, her face lifted toward

## CHÉRI

the sky and her brows knitted. As yet unpowdered, a meager twist of hair on the nape of her neck, with double chin and ruined throat, she imprudently offered herself to the invisible eye.

She moved away to the window, took her check-book from the drawer and inscribed and detached several checks. Then she spread some white pyjamas on the foot of the bed and left the room without a sound.

In taking a long breath, Chéri realized he had not breathed since Léa left the bed. He rose, put on the pyjamas and opened the window. "It's stifling in here," he gasped.

He had the vague and uncomfortable impression of having done something which was rather ugly. Because I pretended to be asleep? But after all, I've seen Léa hundreds of times just after she got out of bed. Only this time, I pretended to be asleep. . . .

The bursting bright day restored its floral tint to the pink room and to the blond and silver Chaplin portrait smiling from the wall, gave back all its sentimental nuances. Chéri bent his head and closed his eyes so that his memory might restore to him the room of the night before; mysterious

and tinged like the inside of a water-melon, an unearthly lighted dome for a lamp and an exultation which carried him, reeling, through his delights. . . .

"Are you up? The chocolate's coming at once."

He noted with gratitude that within a few minutes, Léa had dressed her hair, was rouged slightly and impregnated with the familiar perfume. The sound of her fine cordial voice expanded in the room along with the odor of buttered toast and cocoa. Chéri sat down by two steaming cups and received from Léa's hands the heavily buttered toast. He hunted for something to say and Léa never suspected it since she had known him to be tactiturn at best and contemplative in the presence of food. She ate with good appetite, with the preoccupied haste and gayety of a woman whose trunks are strapped, breakfasting before the train leaves.

"Your second piece of toast, Chéri?"

"No thanks, Nounoune."

"Not hungry any more?"

"Not hungry."

Laughing, she shook her finger at him. "What

## CHÉRI

you need is probably a couple of rhubarb pills, they'd fix you, eh?"

He wrinkled his nose, shocked. "Listen, Nounoune, really you have a passion for occupying yourself with details which are. . . ."

"Tchk, tchk. That's my affair if I choose to. Stick out your tongue. You won't? Then wipe off your chocolate whiskers and let's talk briefly but to the point. The quicker disagreeable things are finished, the better."

Across the table she took one of Chéri's hands in both of hers. "You've come back. It was our fate. You trust yourself to me? I'll take entire care of you."

Without wishing to, she interrupted herself and closed her eyes, docile before her victory. Chéri saw the impetuous blood flood the face of his mistress.

"Ah," she continued in a lower voice, "when I think of all that I never gave you; of all that I never said to you! When I think that I believed you were merely a young transient in my life like all the others; a little more precious than all the others. How stupid I was not to understand that you were

my love, the love, the great love which only comes once."

She opened her eyes which seemed to have become more blue, a blue re-dipped in the shadow of her eyelids. She breathed unevenly.

"Oh," Chéri prayed to himself, "if only she doesn't ask me a question; if only she doesn't expect an answer now; I couldn't speak a word."

She wrung his hand. "Come now, we'll be serious. As I said, we'll go away, we are going, we are gone. Very good. What preparations will you make . . . over there . . . at Neuilly? Let Charlotte arrange the necessary money settlements for that house, it's wiser—and make her be generous, I beg of you. How will you let them know, at Neuilly?—by letter, I suppose. It's not convenient but the less ink spilled the better. We'll see about that together. There's also the question of luggage, none of your things are here any more. . . . All these details are more aggravating than any big problem but don't worry about them. . . . Will you kindly stop pulling at your toe like that? It's with such pretty little habits that one gets infections."

Mechanically he let his foot drop. His native



## CHÉRI

speechlessness crushed him and he was obliged to focus his jaded attention in order to listen. He scrutinized the animated, the joyous imperious face of his friend and asked himself vaguely. Why does she look so happy?

His stupidity became so evident that Léa, who by now was monologuing on the desirability of buying old Berthelley's yacht, stopped short.

"Could anyone believe that you haven't a word of advice to give? Ah, you'll never be anything else but twelve years old."

Chéri, torn from his stupor, passed his hand over his forehead and enveloped Léa with a melancholic gaze. "To you, Nounoune, I'll probably seem twelve years old for another half century."

She winked her eyes several times as if he had blown on the lids and let the silence settle between them.

"What are you trying to say?" she finally demanded.

"Nothing except what I did say, Nounoune. Nothing but the truth. Can you deny it, you who are the most honest person alive?"

She decided to laugh with a carelessness which already hid a great fear.

## CHÉRI

"But your childishness is half your charm, stupid. Later it will be the secret of your eternal youth. And you complain of it! . . . You have the cheek to complain of it to me."

"Yes, Nounoune. Who would you rather I'd complain to?"

He took her hand which she had withdrawn. "My Nounoune, darling, my dearest Nounoune; I'm not only complaining of myself, I'm accusing you."

She felt her hand gripped in a firm hand. And the large dark eyes with shiny lashes, instead of evading hers, clung to her eyes miserably. She did not wish to tremble yet. It's nothing; it's nothing, she thought. It'll only need two or three sharp words, then he'll become insulting and then I'll forgive him. . . . It's nothing more than that. . . . But she failed to find the rebuke necessary to alter the face watching hers.

"Come, come, my dear. . . . You know there are certain jokes which I won't put up with for long."

But at the same time, she adjudged the sound of her voice to be both feeble and false. How badly I said that, she thought. It was like bad theatre.

The ten o'clock sun reached the table which separated them and Léa's polished nails glittered. But the sunshine also lighted on her large, well-made hands, and in the soft, loose skin, on the backs, around the wrists, carved a complicated network, concentric grooves, minute parallelograms like those which a drought engraves after the rains on banks of clay. Léa rubbed her hands with a distracted air, turning her head to lead Chéri's gaze toward the street, but he persisted in his wretched, dog-like contemplation. Brusquely he reconquered the two ashamed hands which pretended to play with a loop of her belt, kissed them and re-kissed them, then couched his cheek upon them, murmuring, "My Nounoune. . . . O, my poor Nounoune."

"Let me alone," she cried with inexplicable anger, jerking her hands from him.

She took a moment to control herself, frightened at her weakness. She had almost burst into sobs. As soon as she was able, she spoke and smiled.

"So now it's me you're sorry for? Why did you accuse me just now?"

"I was wrong," he said humbly. "For me you have always been—"

## CHÉRI

“‘Have been?’” she underlined in a biting voice. “Is this a funeral oration, my young lad?”

“You see?” he reproached her.

He shook his head and she saw clearly that she could not anger him. She tightened all her muscles and restrained her thoughts for the benefit of two or three words, always the same, and which she repeated in the center of her being; He is there, before my eyes. . . . You see, he’s still there. . . . He’s not out of reach. . . . But is he really still there before my eyes?

Her thoughts escaped from this disciplinary rhythm and a great inner lamentation replaced the hypnotic syllables; Oh, if someone could only give back to me the moment when I was saying, “Chéri, your second piece of toast?” That moment is still close to us, it’s not lost forever, it hasn’t yet disappeared into the past. Let’s start from there, the little that’s happened since won’t count, I’ll wipe it out, I’ll wipe it out. . . . I’ll talk to him about trains, our luggage. . . .

She spoke to him, in truth, but she said, “I see. . . . I see that I can’t regard as a man a creature who’s capable, by weakness, of upsetting the lives of two women at the same time. Do you think I

don't understand? As far as voyages are concerned, you like them short, eh? Yesterday at Neuilly; today here, but tomorrow . . . where tomorrow? Here? No, no, my dear; it's not worth lying about, that guilty face wouldn't fool somebody even stupider than I, if there is one over there . . ."

Her violent gesture which indicated the direction of Neuilly, upset a plate of biscuit which Chéri straightened. In proportion as she spoke, she developed her pain, changed it into a burn-chagrin, aggressive and jealous, the garrulous chagrin of a young woman. The rouge on her cheeks turned to wine lees; a lock of her hair, crimped by the curling-iron, trailed down her neck like a small dry snake.

"And even that one—even your wife—you won't find her there every time that it pleases you to go home. Wives, my dear, one doesn't know how one gets them and still less how one loses them. . . . You're going to have your wife kept under lock and key by Charlotte, eh? Marvelous idea. . . . Oh, how I'll laugh the day that—"

Chéri rose, pale and grave. "Nounoune."

"Why Nounoune? Why that? Do you think

you frighten me? You want to lead your own life, do you? Lead it, then. And pretty sights you'll see by the way with a daughter of Marie-Laure. No arms, a flat behind, but that won't prevent her from—"

"I forbid you, Nounoune."

He seized her arm but she rose, freed herself vigorously and broke into hoarse laughter.

"Oh, of course, of course. 'I forbid you to say a word against my wife.' Isn't that it?"

He walked around the table and shivering with indignation, came close to her. "No. I forbid you,—you hear me?—I forbid you to spoil my Nounoune."

She retreated to the end of the room, stammering, "What's that? . . . What. . . ."

He followed her as if to punish her. "You heard me. Is that the way for Nounoune to talk? Dirty little insults, something in the style of Madame Peloux! To think they could come from you, Nounoune."

He tilted his head arrogantly. "I know how Nounoune should talk. I know how she ought to think. I had time to learn. I haven't forgotten the day you said to me, just before I married, 'At

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least don't be cruel. Try not to make her suffer. . . . I have a feeling that they're throwing a fawn to the dogs.' Those were your words. That's really you. And the night before I married, when I ran away to come here and see you, I remember you said to me . . ."

His voice stopped but his face continued to gleam with a bright memory. "Oh, my darling, you were marvelous."

He put his hands on her shoulders. "And even last night," he went on, "the first thing you were afraid of was that I'd made trouble . . . at home. My Nounoune, I knew you as grand, I loved you as grand when we first started. If we have to finish now, must you start being like all other women?"

Confusedly she sensed the guile beneath the praise and seated herself, her face hidden in her hands. "How hard you are, how hard," she stammered. "Why did you come back? I was so calm, so alone, so used to . . ."

She heard herself lying and stopped short.

"Well, I wasn't," said Chéri. "I came back because . . . because . . ."

He lifted his arms, dropped them, lifted them

## CHÉRI

again. "Because I couldn't do without you, there's no point in hunting any other explanation."

They said nothing for a moment.

Overwhelmed, she contemplated this young man, white, impatient as a seagull, his light feet and opened arms already seeming prepared for flight.

Chéri's dark eyes roved over her. "You can be proud of yourself," he said suddenly. "You can be proud. For three months you made me lead a life . . . a life that . . ."

"Me?"

"Who was it if it wasn't you? If a door opened, it was Nounoune; the telephone rang,—Nounoune; a letter in the mailbox in the garden,—Nounoune. . . . I hunted for you in everything even down to the wine I drank without so much as finding the fine Pommery I'd had at your house. . . . And as for the nights. . . . Oh, là, là. . . ."

He marched rapidly and without any noise up and down the carpet. "I can say that I know what it is to suffer for a woman, oh believe me. At present, I'm waiting for all those that'll come after you—dust, that's all they'll be like. Oh, yes, you've perfectly poisoned me."

She sat up slowly, turning first one way, then



another, to follow the coming and going of Chéri. Her cheeks were dry and shining with a febrile red which rendered the blue of her eyes almost intolerable.

His head bent, he walked and talked without ceasing. "Imagine Neuilly without you, the first days after my return. As far as that's concerned, everything without you! . . . I almost went crazy. One night, the child—you know—she was ill; I don't remember with what, headache, neuralgia, something. I felt sorry for her but I had to leave the room, for nothing on earth would have kept me from saying to her, 'Wait, don't cry, I'll go fetch Nounoune and she'll cure you.' And you'd have come too, wouldn't you, Nounoune? . . . Oh, là, là, what a life it was. . . . At the Hôtel Morris, I hired Desmond and paid him well so sometimes at night I could say to him as if he didn't know you, 'Old man, a skin as soft as hers doesn't exist. . . . And your sapphire cabochon, well, hide it, because the blue of her eyes doesn't turn grey in the light like that stone.' I used to tell him how you could hold your own and no mistake, how nobody ever had the last word with you, not even me. . . . I used to say to him, 'Old man, when

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that woman has the right hat on'—you know, your blue one of last year, Nounoune, with the wings—'plus her way of wearing her clothes, bring any woman you choose up beside her and she'd put them all in the shade.' . . . And then the grand way you always walked, talked, your smile, the chic way you carried yourself. . . . I always said to Desmond, 'Ah, what a woman, that Léa.'"

He snapped his fingers with the Pride of ownership. I never said all that to Desmond, he thought. And yet it's no lie I'm telling now. Desmond understood it just the same.

He wanted to continue and looked at Léa. She was still waiting to listen to him. Sitting erect now, she showed him in the full light her noble and ruined face, waxed by burning tears which had dried. An invisible weight pulled down her chin and cheeks, saddened the trembling corners of her mouth. Amidst this wreck of beauty, Chéri could still find intact only the lovely dominating nose, the eyes the color of blue bloom.

"And so, you see, Nounoune, after months of a life like that, I came here and . . ." He halted, frightened at what he had almost said.

## CHÉRI

"You came here and found an old woman," said Léa in a weak tranquil voice.

"Nounoune, listen, Nounoune . . ." He threw himself on his knees against her, letting be seen on his face the cowardice of a child who can find no words to hide his mistake.

"And you find an old woman," repeated Léa. "What are you afraid of, darling?"

She put her arms about his shoulders, felt the stiffness, the defense of his body which suffered because she had been wounded. "Come, come, my Chéri. . . . What are you afraid of,—of having hurt me? Don't cry, my beauty. . . . If you knew how I really thank you. . . ."

He sobbed in protestation and struggled without force.

She bent her cheek to the mussed black hair. "Did you say all that, did you think all that about me? Was I really so lovely in your eyes, really? And so good? At the age when most women have stopped living, for you I was still the handsomest, the best of women and you loved me? Oh my darling, how I thank you. The finest, you said? Poor child."

He collapsed and she supported him between

her arms. "If I'd really been so fine, I'd have made a man of you instead of thinking merely of the pleasure of your body and mine. The finest? Oh no, my darling one, I wasn't that since I wouldn't let you go and now it's almost too late. . . ."

He seemed to sleep in Léa's arms but his eyelids, obstinately closed, trembled without cease and with a motionless closed hand, he clung to her dressingrobe which slowly tore.

"It's too late, it's almost too late . . . and yet . . ." She bent over him. "My darling, listen to me. Wake up, my beauty, listen to me with your eyes open. Don't be afraid to look at me. After all, I'm the woman you loved, you know,—the finest woman . . ."

He opened his eyes and his first moist glance was already full of a pleading egotistical hope. Léa turned her head. Oh, his eyes. . . . Let's get it over with quickly. . . . She placed her hand on Chéri's forehead. "It was me, dearest, the woman who said to you, 'Don't make any unnecessary pain, spare the fawn' . . . it really was me? I don't recall it any more. Fortunately you remembered. You're breaking away from me very late, my darling, my bad little boy, I've carried you next my

heart for too long and now you have heavy burdens of your own—a young wife and maybe a baby. . . . I'm responsible for everything you lack. Yes, yes, my beauty, owing to me, here you are at twenty-five, so light, so spoiled and so sad. . . . I have a great deal to suffer for. You'll give pain, you'll get pain. You who loved me. . . ."

The hand which slowly riddled her silken robe clenched and Léa felt on her breast the painful nails of a bad child.

"... you who loved me," she went on after a pause, "could you. . . . I don't know if I can make myself clear. . . ."

He leaned away from her the better to listen and she almost cried out, "Place your hand again on my breast and your nails in their marks, my strength leaves me when your flesh leaves mine."

But she bent over him in her turn, on his knees before her and continued, "You who loved me, who will miss me." . . . She smiled at him and at the look in his eyes. . . . "What vanity, eh? . . . You who'll miss me, I hope that when you feel yourself close to frightening away the fawn that is your own, who is in your care, that you'll hold her, that you'll invent in that moment all that I never taught you. . . . I never talked to you

## CHÉRI

about the future. Forgive me, Chéri; I loved you as if we would both of us die within an hour of each other. Because I was born twenty-four years before you, I was doomed and I carried you along with me. . . .”

He listened with a concentration that made him look hard. She passed her hand over his troubled forehead to smooth its furrow. “Can you see us, Chéri, going to lunch at Armenonville? . . . Can you see us inviting Monsieur and Madame Lili? . . .”

She laughed sadly and shivered. “I’m just as finished as that old creature. . . . Quick, child, quick, go hunt your youth, it’s only just caught on the bones of old women, you still have it and she has it, the girl who’s waiting for you. You’ve tasted youth. You know it doesn’t satisfy but that one always goes back for more. . . . Oh it wasn’t just last night that you started making comparisons. And what was I doing, giving good advice and showing off my noble soul? What do I know of you two? She loves you, now it’s her turn to tremble, she’ll suffer like a lover and not like a mother gone astray. You can talk to her as a master and not as a capricious gigolo. . . . Go. Go quickly.”

She spoke in a voice of hasty supplication. He

listened, standing, planted before her, his chest bare, his hair stormy, so tempting that she knotted her hands together to prevent them seizing him. He guessed it perhaps and did not undress. A hope, crazy as that which might come during their fall to people dropping off a tower, flashed between them and went out.

"Go," she said in a low voice. "I love you. It's too late. Go away. But go at once. Dress yourself."

She rose and fetched him his shoes, spread out his socks and his crumpled shirt. He stood in place, moving his fingers awkwardly as if they were numb and she had to find his braces, his cravat; but she refrained from coming close to him and did not help him. While he dressed she glanced frequently into the court as if she were expecting something.

Dressed, he looked more pale with eyes which augmented their halo of fatigue.

"You don't feel ill?" she asked him. And she added timidly, her eyes lowered, "You could . . . could rest a moment." But at once she mastered herself and came back to him as if he were in great danger; "No, no, you'll be better at home. . . .

## CHÉRI

Hurry, it's not yet noon, a good hot bath will refresh you and the open air. . . . Here, your gloves. . . . Oh yes and your hat on the floor. . . . Put your coat on, you might catch cold. . . . Au revoir, my Chéri, au revoir. . . . Yes, that's it, give Charlotte my . . ." She closed the door behind him and silence put an end to her desperate, vain words. She heard Chéri stumble in the staircase and she ran to the window. He descended the steps and stopped in the middle of the court.

"He's coming back, he's coming back," she cried, lifting her arms.

A gasping, old woman repeated her gestures in the long oblong mirror and Léa asked herself what she could have in common with this old lunatic.

Chéri continued his path toward the street, opened the gate and passed through. On the sidewalk he buttoned his topcoat to hide his evening clothes of the night before. Léa let the curtain fall. But she still had time to see that Chéri lifted his head toward the spring sky and the flowering chestnut trees and that in walking he filled his lungs with air like a man escaping from prison.









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